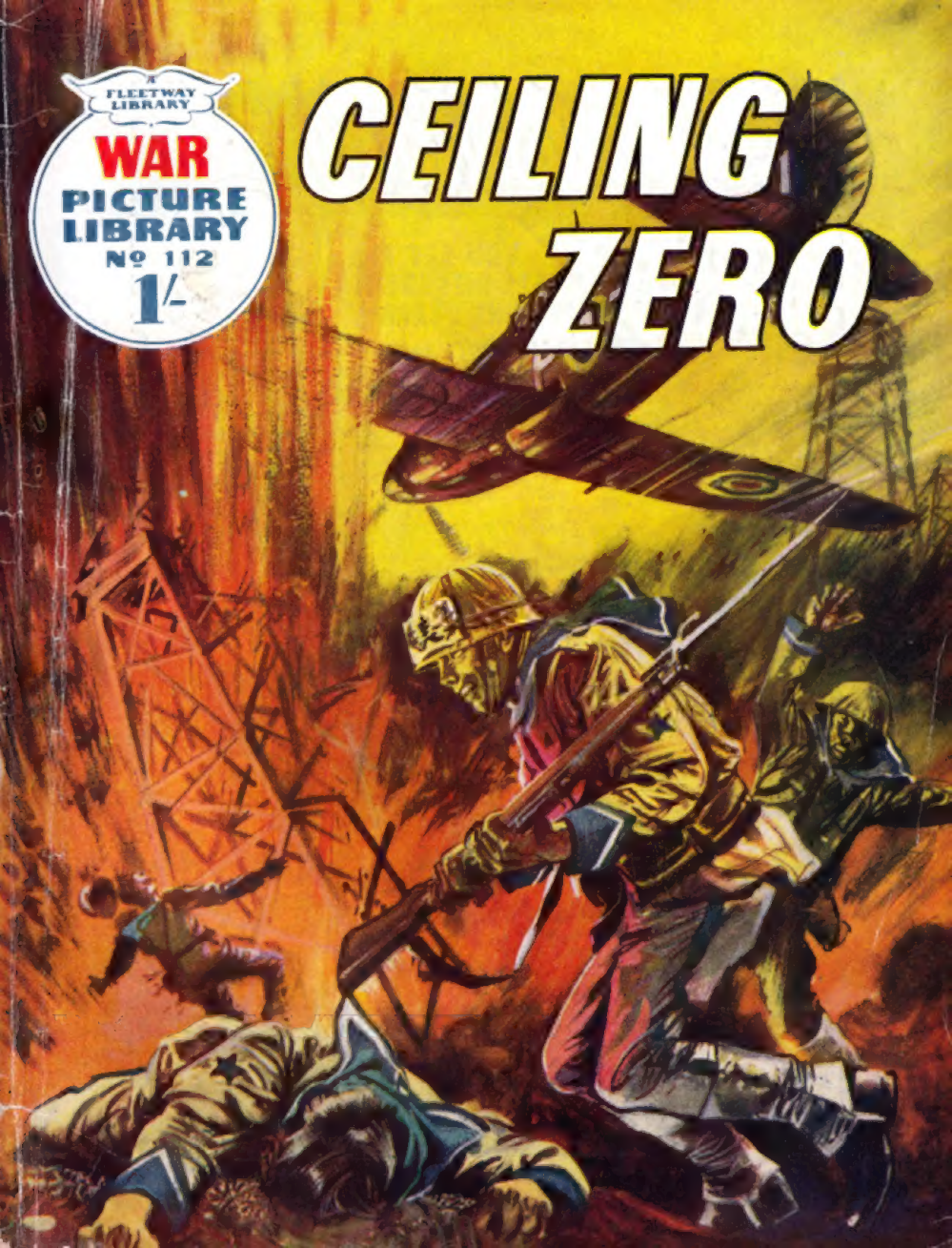
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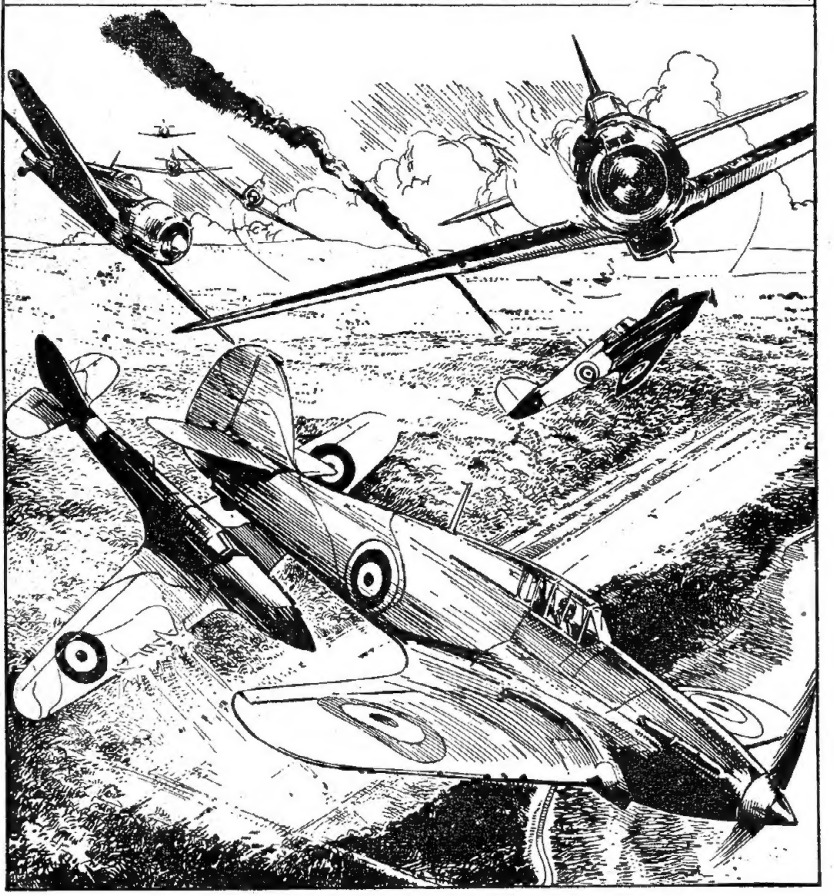
IN THE SAVAGE SKIES OVER THE JUNGLES OF THE ARAKAN IN SOUTHERN BURMA, AN R.A.F. SQUADRON OF HURRICANES FOUGHT ITSELF TO A STANDSTILL, STRIVING TO COVER THE BITTER RETREAT OF THE BRITISH ARMY BACK TO INDIA.



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Chapter 1. LIMIT of ENDURANCE

ONE DARK MAY NIGHT OF 1942, A MAN, TIRED, DIRTY AND BATTLE-WORN, STOOD IN THE SHADOWS OF THE RAILHEAD, BEING QUESTIONED BY A ROYAL AIR FORCE OFFICER.

FROM NEARBY CAME THE CLANK AND HISS OF A TRAIN, FULL OF WOUNDED SOLDIERS, AWAITING THE SIGNAL TO DEPART FOR THE HOSPITALS OF CALCUTTA.

THE OVERSTRAINED, HAGGARD SURVIVOR BEGAN A FANTASTIC STORY . . .

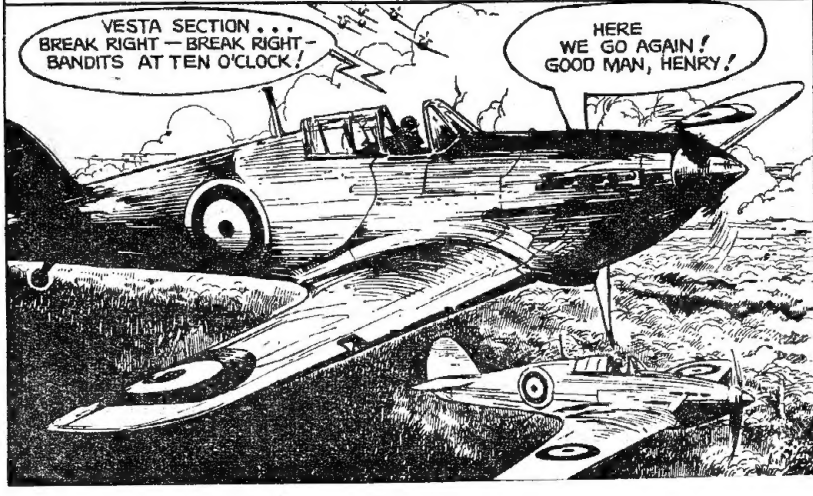
THE JAPS OUTNUMBERED THE ALLIES IN THE AIR BY SIX TO ONE AND THERE WERE NO REPLACEMENTS.

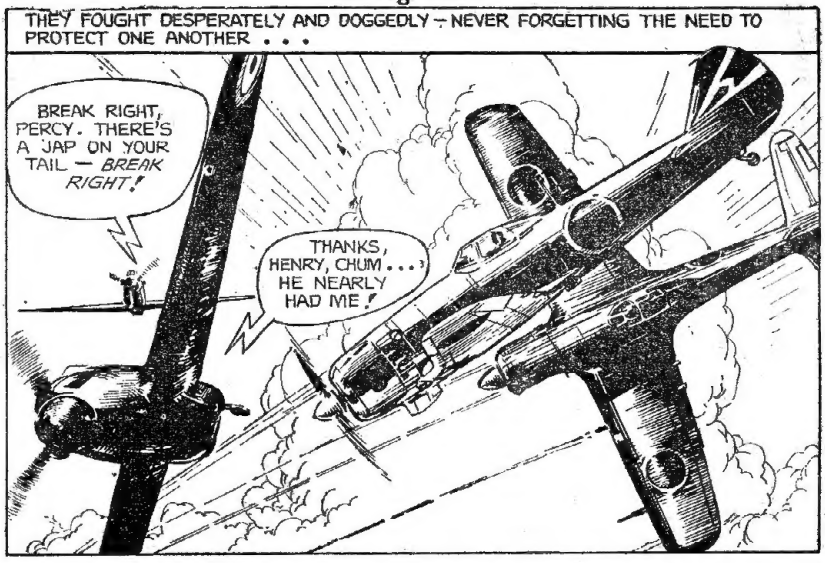
THEY OPERATED FROM A MAKE-SHIFT AIRSTRIP AT MITYGUPDAW, HEWN OUT OF THE JUNGLE .

THEIR PLANES WERE OBSOLETE HURRICANE MARK 1s , WITH THE BULLET-HOLES PATCHED OVER AND REPLACEMENT PARTS SALVAGED FROM WRECKED AIRCRAFT . . .

THE SQUADRON PILOTS WERE VETERAN SURVIVORS OF VARIOUS UNITS IN THE CAMPAIGN . . . HELD TOGETHER STILL AS A FIGHTING TEAM BY THEIR TOUGH YOUNG C.O., SQUADRON LEADER BRUCE TYRRELL .

BRUCE DEMANDED THE STRICTEST DISCIPLINE IN THE AIR, FOR THEIR LIVES DEPENDED UPON IT . . .

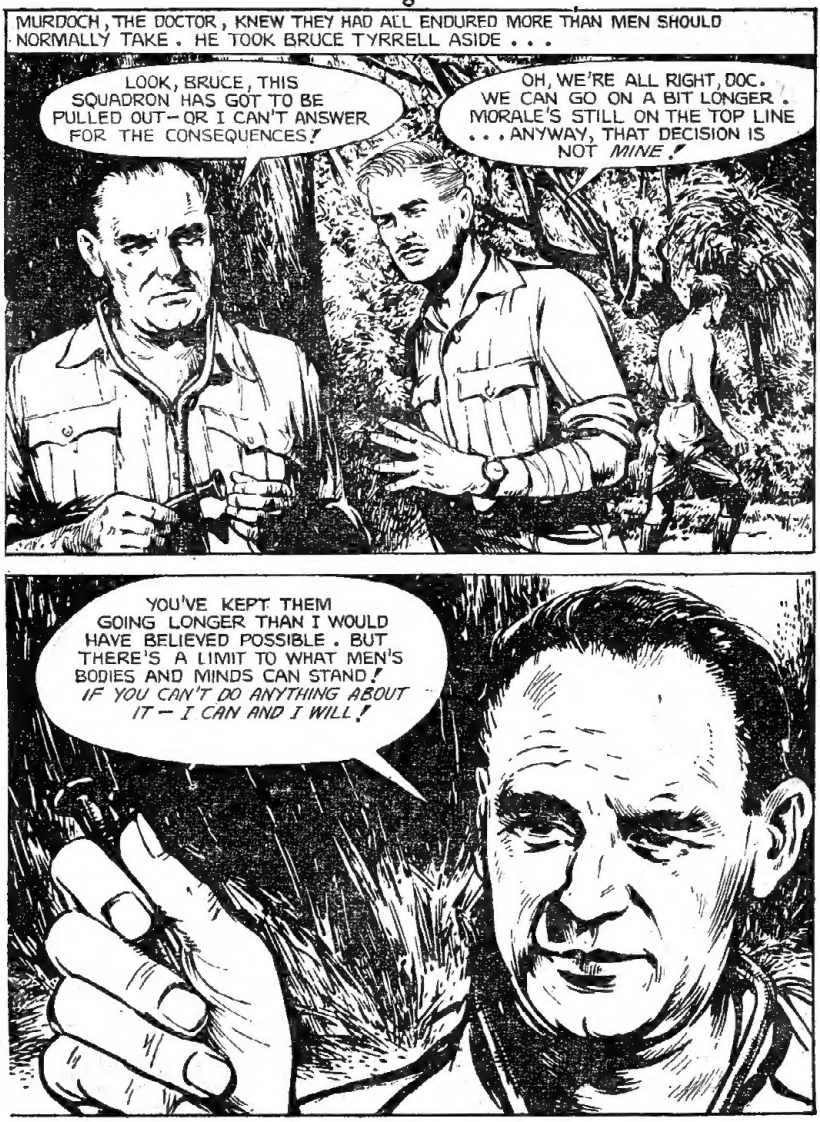



THEY FOUGHT DESPERATELY AND DOGGEDLY – NEVER FORGETTING THE NEED TO PROTECT ONE ANOTHER . . .
BREAK RIGHT, PERCY. THERE'S A JAP ON YOUR TAIL — BREAK RIGHT!
THANKS, HENRY, CHUM . . . HE NEARLY HAD ME!

RETURNING ONCE AGAIN TO THE SUN-SCORCHED EARTH, THERE WAS NO REST . . .
HE'S FLAKED OUT — GET HIM INTO THE SHADE . BRING A WATER BOTTLE!
AS SOON AS WE'RE RE-FUELLED, WE TAKE OFF AGAIN . . . COME ON, YOU LADS, GET GOING WITH THOSE PETROL CANS!

IF THERE WAS ONE MAN WHO SEEMED TO KEEP CHEERFUL AND RELAXED WHATEVER HAPPENED, IT WAS HENRY MASON—THE MOST BRILLIANT OF ALL THAT GROUP OF YOUNG PILOTS. HE KEPT ALL THEIR SPIRITS UP.

WHILE HARASSED GROUND CREWS SWEATED TO KEEP THE BATTERED HURRICANES AIRWORTHY, ONE MAN SLAVED DOGGEDLY TO KEEP THE MEN'S BODIES FROM COLLAPSING. HE WAS THE SQUADRON MEDICAL OFFICER—OLDER AND WISER THAN ALL OF THEM.


MURDOCH, THE DOCTOR, KNEW THEY HAD ALL ENDURED MORE THAN MEN SHOULD NORMALLY TAKE. HE TOOK BRUCE TYRRELL ASIDE . . .
LOOK, BRUCE, THIS SQUADRON HAS GOT TO BE PULLED OUT—OR I CAN'T ANSWER FOR THE CONSEQUENCES!
OH, WE'RE ALL RIGHT, DOC. WE CAN GO ON A BIT LONGER. MORALE'S STILL ON THE TOP LINE . . . ANYWAY, THAT DECISION IS NOT MINE!
YOU'VE KEPT THEM GOING LONGER THAN I WOULD HAVE BELIEVED POSSIBLE. BUT THERE'S A LIMIT TO WHAT MEN'S BODIES AND MINDS CAN STAND! IF YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT—I CAN AND I WILL!

MURDOCH, FURIOUS WITH HIGHER AUTHORITY, GOT THROUGH TO INDIA . . . HE USED HIS AUTHORITY AS SQUADRON M.O TO DEMAND TO SPEAK PERSONALLY TO THE GROUP CAPTAIN HIMSELF.

. . . I TELL YOU THEY CAN'T GO ON! THEY'RE ALL OVERDUE FOR HOSPITAL ALREADY.

AS EXPERIENCED PILOTS, THEY'RE WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD. I WOULDN'T REPLACE THEM WITH UNSEASONED PILOTS, EVEN IF I COULD. I'M SORRY, THEY'LL HAVE TO STAY A WHILE LONGER!

BRUCE TYRRELL, IN HIS TURN, HAD BEGGED FOR REINFORCEMENTS, APPARENTLY TO NO AVAIL . . . UNTIL ONE DAY, INTO THE MELTING-POT CAME PILOT OFFICER DAVID CROSS, FRESH FROM THE FLYING SCHOOLS OF ENGLAND AND INDIA.

BY GLORY! HERE'S A NEW PILOT. HEY, DOC, WHERE'S THE SKIPPER?

ONE PILOT? THEY MUST BE JOKING.

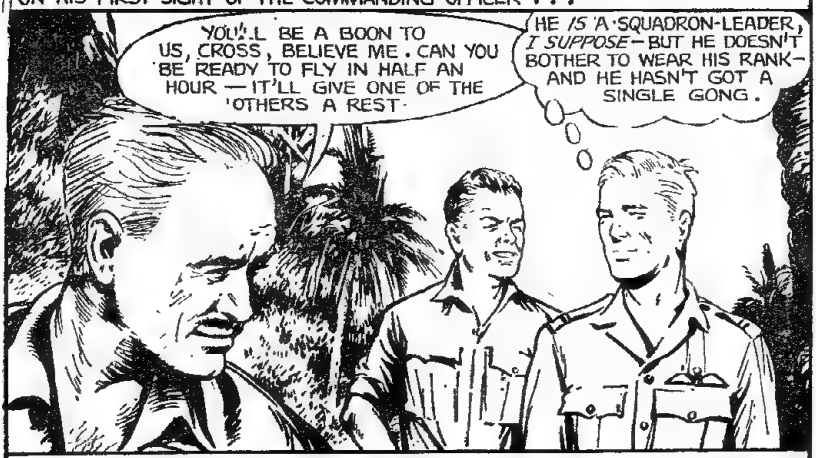
65

Chapter 2. THE JINX

DAVID CROSS WAS INDEED YOUNG AND FRESH. HIS FIRST REACTION, ON SEEING THE DISHEVELLED SURVIVORS OF THE MAKESHIFT SQUADRON WAS ONE OF ASTONISHMENT AND SHOCK.

THE NEW PILOT'S SURPRISE WAS UNDERSTANDABLE – BUT IT WAS TACTLESS OF HIM TO PUT HIS THOUGHTS INTO WORDS . . .

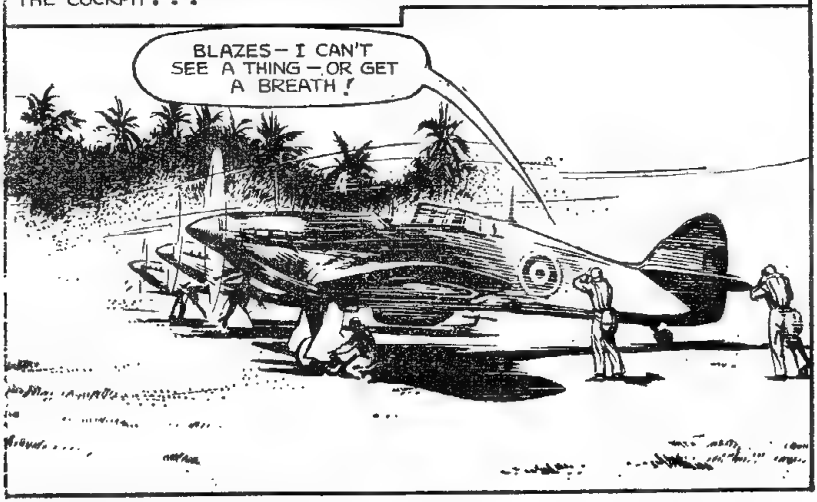
DAVID'S LOOK OF DISDAIN WAS ONLY TOO APPARENT ON HIS FACE, ESPECIALLY ON HIS FIRST SIGHT OF THE COMMANDING OFFICER . . .



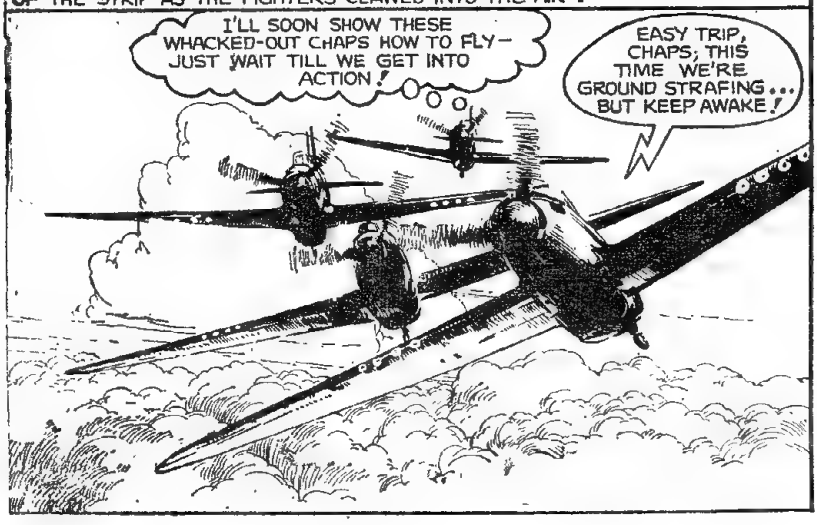
DAVID WAS NOT TO KNOW THAT BRUCE TYRRELL HAD WON THE D.S.O., D.F.C. AND BAR IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

PUZZLED, THE 19-YEAR-OLD PILOT WATCHED THE HURRICANES BEING MAN-HANDLED TO THE END OF THE STRIP . . .

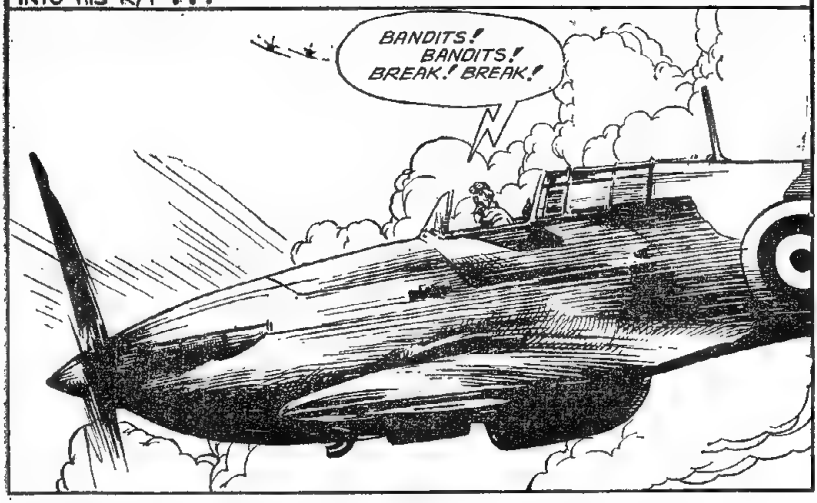
FLYING-KIT WAS FOUND FOR DAVID CROSS AND AS THE HURRICANES' ENGINES ROARED INTO LIFE, HE FOUGHT HIS WAY THROUGH DENSE CLOULDS OF DUST TO THE COCKPIT. . .



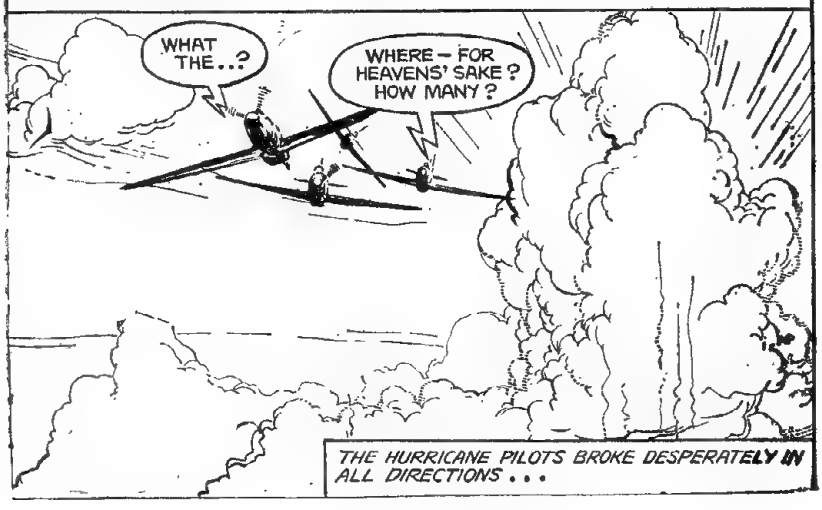
THE THUNDER OF THE ENGINES BEAT BACK FROM THE PALM TREES AT THE EDGE OF THE STRIP AS THE FIGHTERS CLAWED INTO THE AIR.



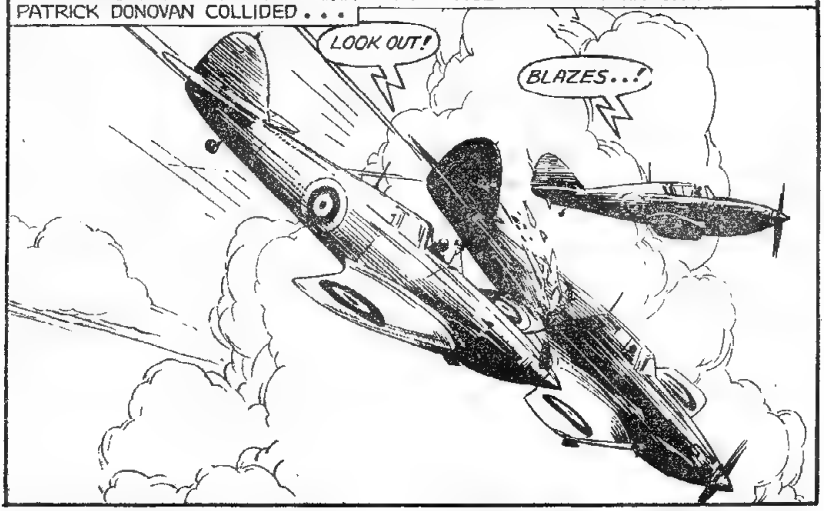
DAVID'S NERVES WERE FRESH, HIS EYES ALERT. HE SAW THE TWO ZEROS SNEAKING UP BEFORE THE OTHERS DID AND INSTANTLY YELLED A WARNING INTO HIS R/T . . .



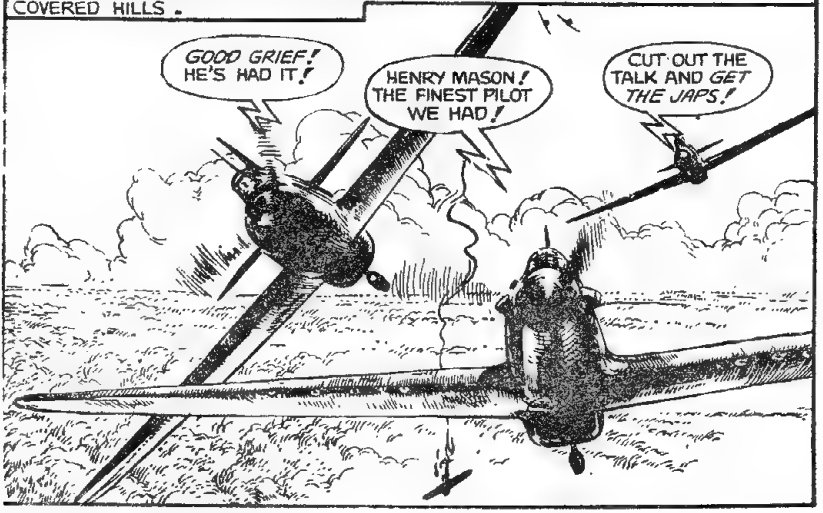
BUT THE WARNING ONLY CAUSED PANIC — FOR HE GAVE NO INDICATION OF NUMBERS OR DIRECTION.



THEIR REACTIONS WERE A SHADE TOO SLOW — AND TRAGEDY STRUCK! A WING TIP SLICED INTO A METAL-SKINNED FUSELAGE AS HENRY MASON AND PATRICK DONOVAN COLLIDED . . .



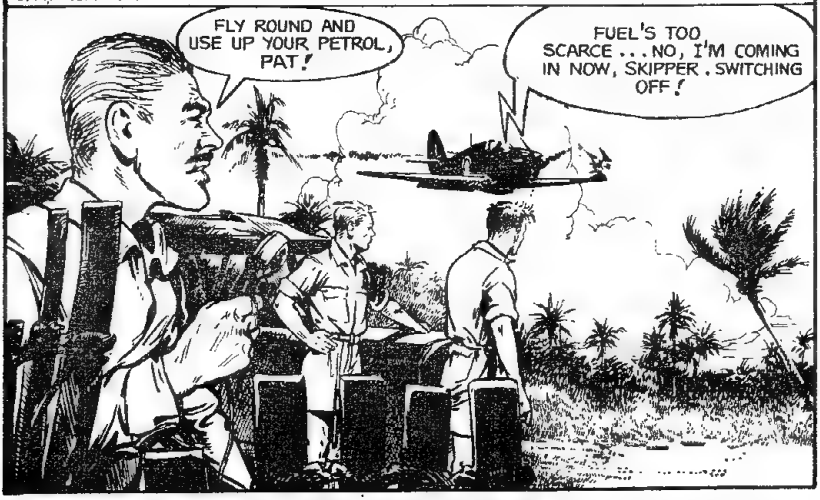
PATRICK WAS ABLE TO HAUL HIS DAMAGED PLANE OUT OF ITS DIVE BUT HENRY'S SHATTERED HURRICANE WENT CARTWHEELING DOWN TOWARDS THE JUNGLE-COVERED HILLS .



EVEN AFTER HIS OWN EARLY WARNING, DAVID CROSS NEARLY GOT HIMSELF SHOT DOWN WHEN HE BADLY UNDERESTIMATED THE QUALITY OF THE JAP FIGHTERS.
BREAK UPWARDS, CROSS... CLIMB!
THANKS!
THEY RETURNED TO THE JUNGLE STRIP WITH HEAVY HEARTS FOR HENRY MASON HAD BEEN IMMENSELY POPULAR. THE C.O. AT ONCE BEGAN A STERN ENQUIRY...
WHO WAS IT SHOUTED OVER THE R/T LIKE THAT? YOU ALL KNOW THE DRILL BY NOW. WAS IT YOU, CROSS?
HECK, HOW WAS I TO KNOW WHAT YOUR PRECIOUS DRILL WAS, SIR? I ONLY ARRIVED TODAY.
DAVID HAD SOME EXCUSE BUT HIS SURLY ARGUMENT DID NOT STRENGTHEN HIS CASE.
IT WASN'T MY FAULT—I SHOULD HAVE BEEN BRIEFED.
WE KEEP TOGETHER AS A TEAM FOR WEEKS... THEN THIS LITTLE FOOL COMES ALONG AND WRECKS IT ALL!
LEAVE HIM ALONE, PERCY, BUT THIS MUST NOT HAPPEN AGAIN!

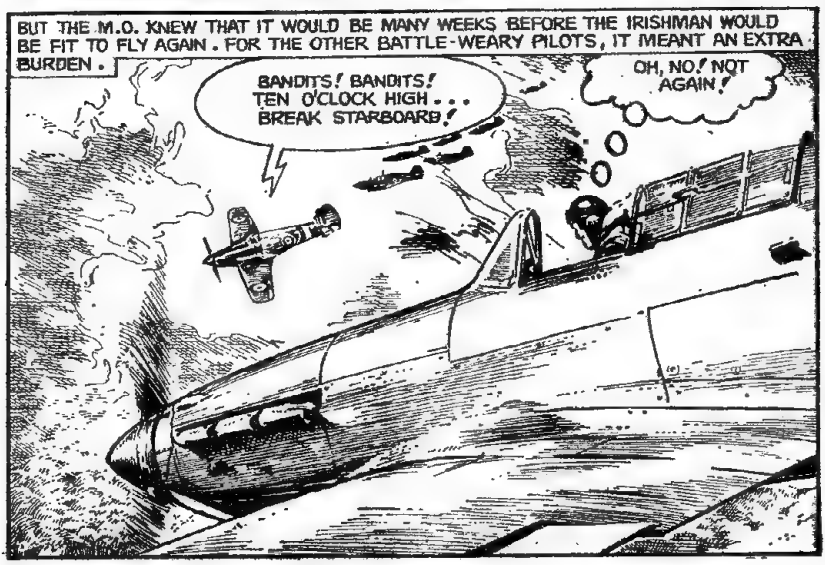
ON SUBSEQUENT MISSIONS, THE SQUADRON SOON MISSED THE ALERT, CHEERFUL INFLUENCE OF HENRY MASON.
FOR PETE'S SAKE, CROSS — YOU LET THEM GET RIGHT IN AMONGST US!
WELL, DON'T BLAME ME THIS TIME! I'M NOT GOING TO STICK MY NECK OUT AND BE SHOUTED AT AGAIN.
PIPE DOWN AND GET ON WITH IT! HEY, PAT, LOOK OUT.
THE PATCH ON MY WING HASN'T HELD... HE GOT ME!
SOMETHING IN THE TEAM'S ALREADY BREAKING UP... BLAZES, WHO'S BOUGHT IT NOW! GLORY! IT'S PAT...

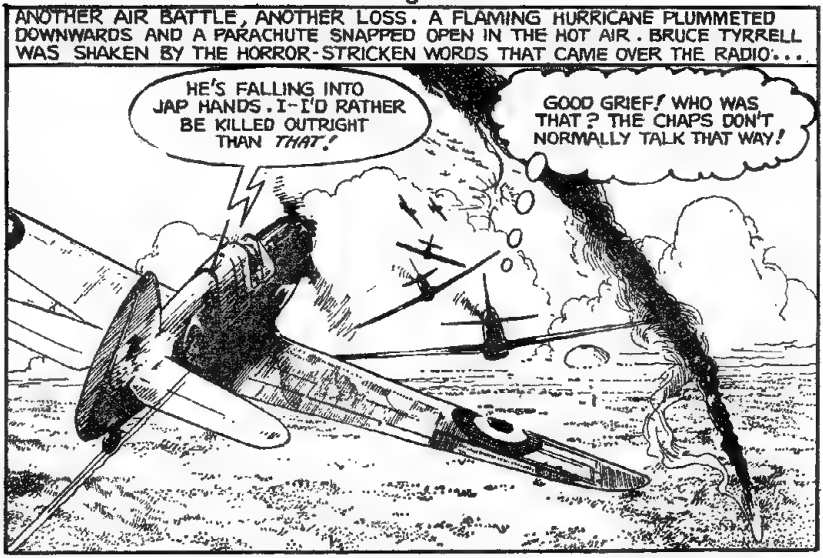
SOMEHOW, PATRICK DONOVAN ELUDED THE ZERO'S ATTACK BUT HE WAS LEFT TO FACE A HAZARDOUS CRASH-LANDING WITH HIS DAMAGED WING AND A JAMMED UNDERCARRIAGE.

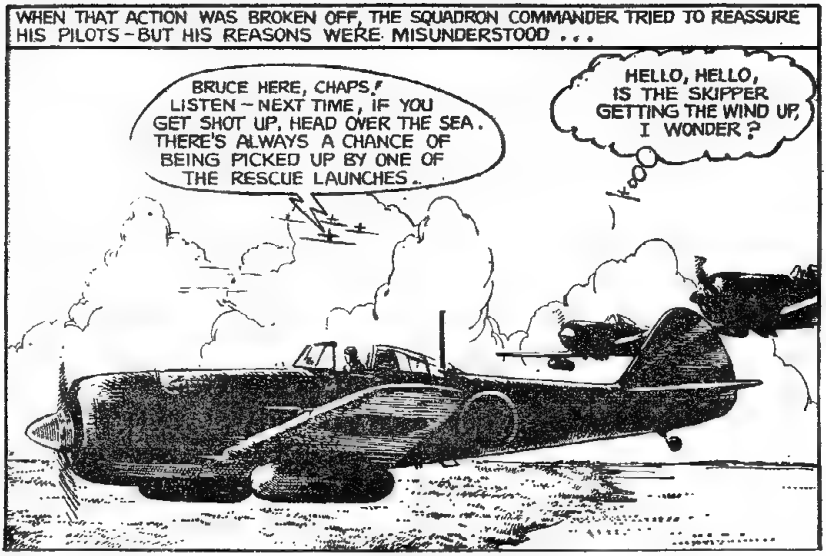


AMBULANCE AND CRASH-WAGON WERE WAITING AS THE HURRICANE SKIDDED IN ON ITS METAL-SKINNED FUSELAGE.

FORTUNATELY, THE PLANE DID NOT BURST INTO FLAMES . . . BUT PAT DONOVAN WAS BADLY KNOCKED ABOUT . . .
. . . IS THAT . . . IS THAT YOU, DOC? HOW'D I DO?
YOU'RE GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT, PAT, IT WAS A GREAT LANDING.


BUT THE M.O. KNEW THAT IT WOULD BE MANY WEEKS BEFORE THE IRISHMAN WOULD BE FIT TO FLY AGAIN. FOR THE OTHER BATTLE-WEARY PILOTS, IT MEANT AN EXTRA BURDEN.
BANDITS! BANDITS! TEN O'CLOCK HIGH . . . BREAK STARBOARD!
OH, NO! NOT AGAIN!


ANOTHER AIR BATTLE, ANOTHER LOSS. A FLAMING HURRICANE PLUMMETED DOWNWARDS AND A PARACHUTE SNAPPED OPEN IN THE HOT AIR. BRUCE TYRRELL WAS SHAKEN BY THE HORROR-STRICKEN WORDS THAT CAME OVER THE RADIO...
HE'S FALLING INTO JAP HANDS. I-I'D RATHER BE KILLED OUTRIGHT THAN THAT!
GOOD GRIEF! WHO WAS THAT? THE CHAPS DON'T NORMALLY TALK THAT WAY!

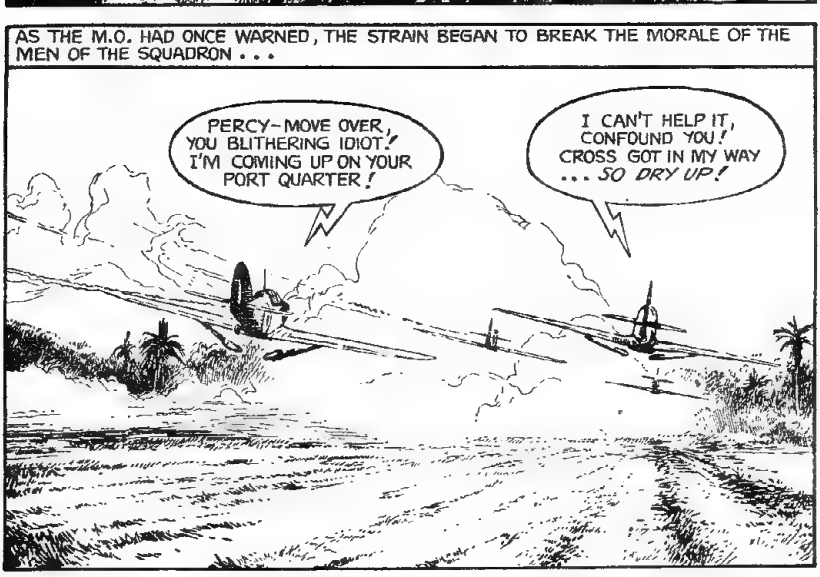

WHEN THAT ACTION WAS BROKEN OFF, THE SQUADRON COMMANDER TRIED TO REASSURE HIS PILOTS - BUT HIS REASONS WERE MISUNDERSTOOD ...
BRUCE HERE, CHAPS! LISTEN - NEXT TIME, IF YOU GET SHOT UP, HEAD OVER THE SEA. THERE'S ALWAYS A CHANCE OF BEING PICKED UP BY ONE OF THE RESCUE LAUNCHES.
HELLO, HELLO, IS THE SKIPPER GETTING THE WIND UP, I WONDER?

IT WAS ALWAYS THE OLD HANDS WHO WERE SHOT DOWN — DAVID CROSS SEEMED TO LEAD A CHARMED LIFE.
LOOK- THAT LITTLE SO-AND-SO, CROSS, IS BACK AGAIN . . . NOTHING HAPPENS TO HIM!
HE HASN'T SCORED A SINGLE KILL YET, EITHER! HAVE YOU HEARD THE WAY HE TREATS THE ERKS — IT FAIR GETS UNDER MY SKIN!

CHARLIE HARDWICK WAS THE FITTER WHO CAME IN FOR THE ROUGH EDGE OF DAVID CROSS' TONGUE MOST OF ALL.
LUMME, SIR — IT'LL TAKE HOURS TO PATCH THIS UP.
WHAT ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT, HARDWICK? YOU DON'T HAVE TO RISK YOUR NECK TO BRING IT BACK EACH TIME! DO YOUR JOB, AND SEE YOU DO IT PROPERLY!

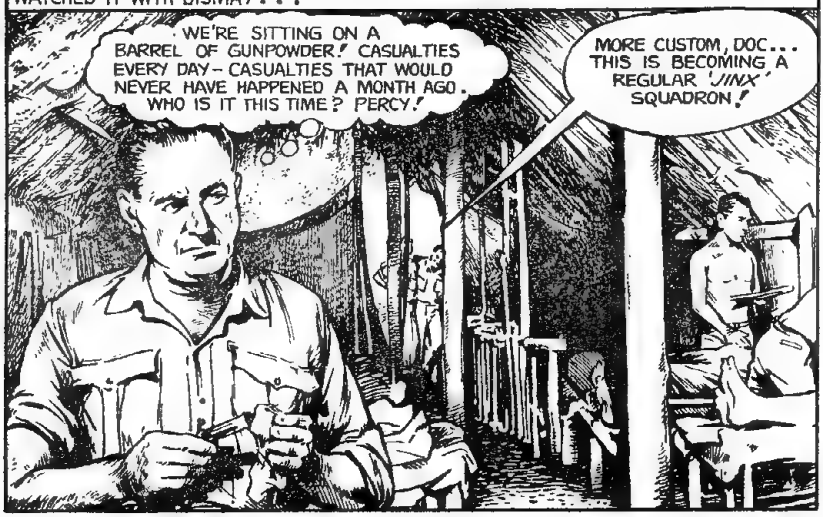
THESE FURTHER CASUALTIES WERE HARDLY THE YOUNG PILOT'S FAULT — BUT THE OTHERS CAME TO BLAME HIM MORE AND MORE . . .
YOU LITTLE JONAH! FIRST HENRY GETS KILLED . . . THEN PAT HAS A NASTY CRACK-UP . . .
IT'S NOT MY FAULT! YOU KNOW DARNED WELL THEY WERE JUST PLAIN TIRED! LEAVE ME ALONE!

SULLEN AND CONFUSED, DAVID WANDERED OFF. HE FOUND ESCAPE FROM THE EYES THAT GLARED WITH HATRED AMONG THE RUINS OF AN OLD NATIVE TEMPLE IN THE JUNGLE.
WHY CAN'T THEY GIVE A MAN A CHANCE? I'M NEW AND I'VE JUST GOT TO HAVE TIME TO LEARN THINGS. NOW, I ALMOST THINK THEY WOULD LIKE ME TO BE KILLED!

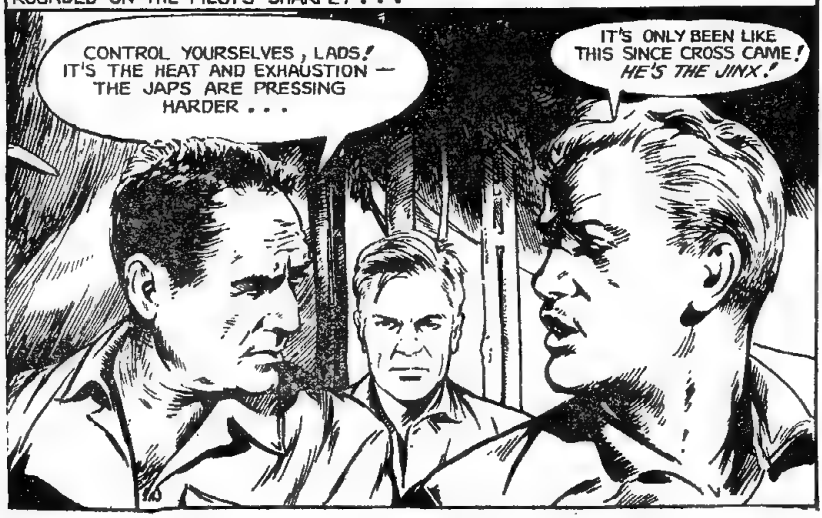

AS THE M.O. HAD ONCE WARNED, THE STRAIN BEGAN TO BREAK THE MORALE OF THE MEN OF THE SQUADRON . . .
PERCY—MOVE OVER, YOU BLITHERING IDIOT! I'M COMING UP ON YOUR PORT QUARTER!
I CAN'T HELP IT, CONFOUND YOU! CROSS GOT IN MY WAY . . . SO DRY UP!

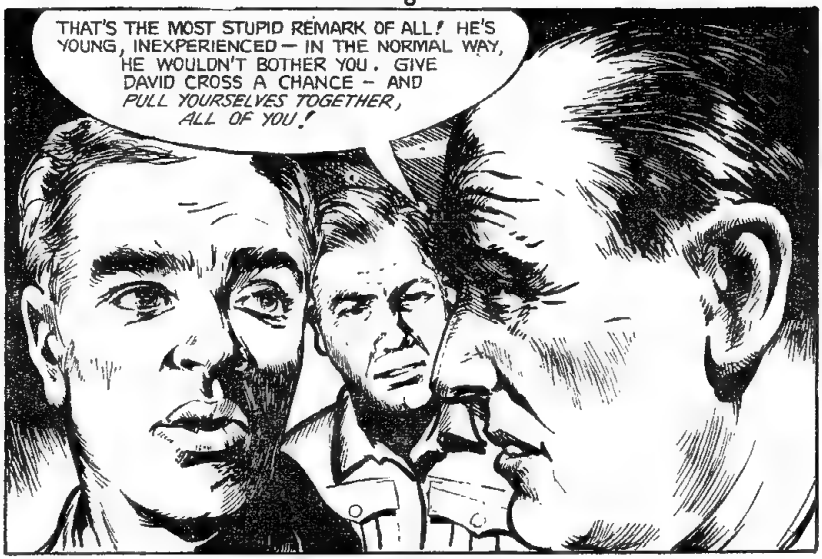
ONE PARTICULAR MAN ESPECIALLY LOATHED DAVID CROSS. HE WAS CHARLIE HARDWICK, HIS OWN FITTER...
HE TREATS US LIKE DOGS! MISTER MASON WAS A GRAND LAD TO WORK FOR — AND WHO KILLED HIM? MISTER BLOOMING CROSS!
ANOTHER FITTER OVERHEARD HARDWICK MENTION CROSS' NAME...
HEY, DID YOU HEAR SOME LOCAL WOGS BEEN COMPLAINING ABOUT A BLOKE WANDERING ABOUT ONE OF THEIR TEMPLES — DESECRATING 'OLY GROUND 'E CALLED IT! IT WAS THAT CROSS!
WHAT A THING TO DO! JUST ASKING FOR BAD LUCK — AS IF WE HAVEN'T GOT A JINX ON US ALREADY.
OVERWORKED, OVERTIRED, THE GROUND CREWS STARTED TO ARGUE...
LOOK, MATE, FORGET THAT SUPERSTITIOUS 'JINX' STUFF! JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE SCARED THE JAPS'LL GET YOU...
HERE, WHO SAY'S I'M SCARED!
HE'S RIGHT, BILL — CROSS IS A BLOOMING JINX! LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO MASON... AND DONOVAN...

THE HATRED AND THE RUMOURS BUILT UP . . . AND MURDOCH, THE MEDICAL OFFICER, WATCHED IT WITH DISMAY . . .



THE DOCTOR KNEW HOW EASY IT WAS FOR BATTLE-WEARY MEN TO BREAK AND HE ROUNDED ON THE PILOTS SHARPLY . . .



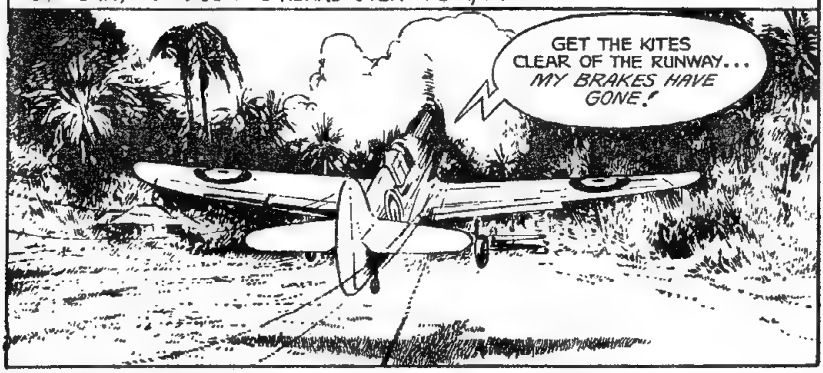

THAT'S THE MOST STUPID REMARK OF ALL! HE'S YOUNG, INEXPERIENCED — IN THE NORMAL WAY, HE WOULDN'T BOTHER YOU. GIVE DAVID CROSS A CHANCE — AND *PULL YOURSELVES TOGETHER, ALL OF YOU!*

A LITTLE LATER, SQUADRON-LEADER MURDOCH GOT THROUGH BY WIRELESS TO COMMAND... RENEWING HIS PLEA FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE SQUADRON...
I GIVE THE SQUADRON *TWO DAYS!* AFTER THAT, I WARN YOU, IF THE JAPS DON'T DESTROY THEM, THEY'LL DESTROY THEMSELVES...
YES, YES, YOU'VE TOLD ME ALL THIS BEFORE, ANYWAY, THE ARMY WILL BE WITHDRAWING SOON— THE SQUADRON MIGHT AS WELL HANG ON A FEW DAYS LONGER!

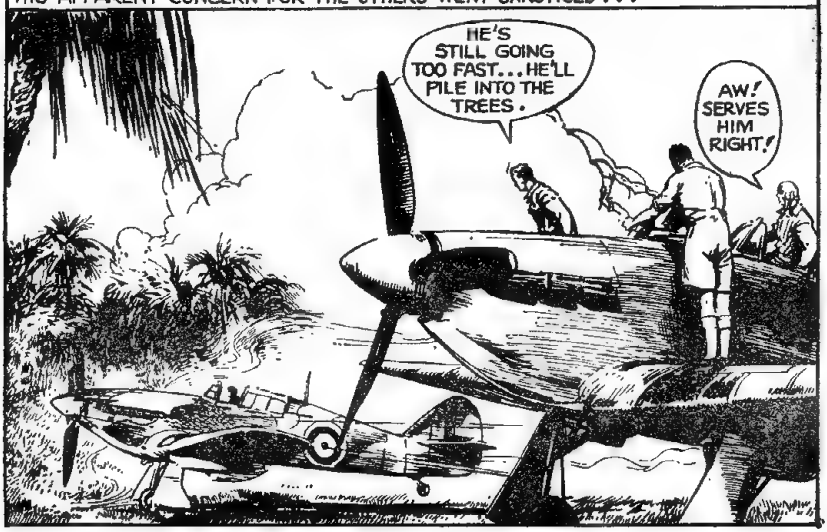
COMING OUT OF THE CONTROL HUT, MURDOCH RAN INTO DAVID CROSS. AT THE SAME TIME, THEY BOTH OVERHEARD THE VOICES OF TWO MEN PASSING BY, ONE OF WHOM WAS CORPORAL HARDWICK.
WHERE Y'GOING, CHARLIE?
ME - I'M GOING TO FIX THAT ROTTEN LITTLE PERISHER'S KITE - BUT GOOD!
GOOD GRIEF! WHY, I'LL...
DID YOU HEAR THE WAY HE SPOKE? HARDWICK KNEW I WAS LISTENING!
TAKE MY ADVICE, DAVID — FORGET ALL ABOUT IT... THESE MEN HAVE BEEN THROUGH HELL!
RELUCTANTLY, DAVID TOOK THE M.O.'S UNDERSTANDING ADVICE.

Chapter 3. SIX LIVES for ONE

NEXT DAY, THEY LOST ANOTHER PILOT... AND WHEN THEY RETURNED TO THE AIR-STRIP, DAVID HUNG BACK UNTIL THE OTHERS HAD LANDED. THEN, JUST AS HE WAS COMING IN, HIS VOICE WAS HEARD OVER THE R/T...



HIS APPARENT CONCERN FOR THE OTHERS WENT UNNOTICED...



THE HURRICANE SHOT OFF THE END OF THE RUNWAY AT SPEED AND PLUNGED INTO THE UNDERGROWTH . . .

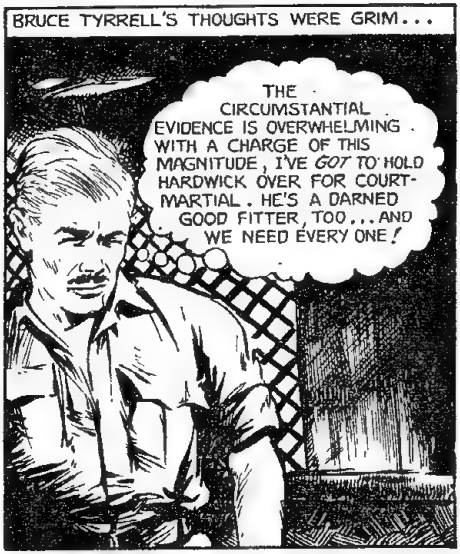
THE FIGHTER SKIDDED ONWARDS . . . AND THEN SETTLED BETWEEN TWO OF THE TREES IN THE JUNGLE.

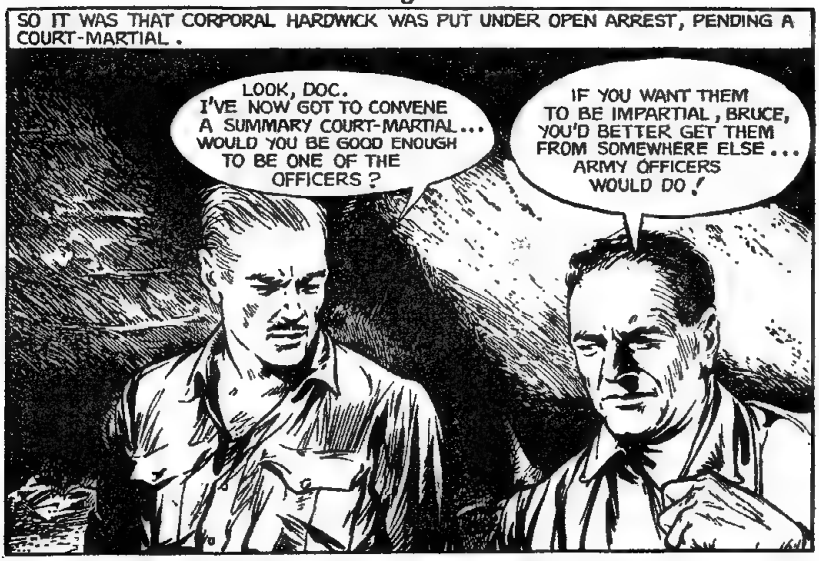
AS DAVID STAGGERED FROM THE WRECKAGE – UNHURT, BUT CONSIDERABLY SHAKEN, HE WAS MET BY AN IRATE C.O.

AT DAVID'S URGING, BRUCE TYRRELL LOOKED INTO THE COCKPIT...
GREAT SCOTT! IT'S CUT CLEAN ACROSS! COULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED IN THE CRASH...
SOMEONE TRIED TO MURDER ME! IT MUST BE MY FITTER — HARDWICK! I WANT TO CHARGE HIM!
YOU CAN'T CHARGE HIM WITH MURDER, CROSS!
BUT I CAN CHARGE HIM WITH GROSS NEGLIGENCE — AND THAT I'M GOING TO DO!
DAVID BEGAN TO WALK AWAY — AND BRUCE TYRRELL SPUN HIM ROUND ANGRILY...
WAIT, CROSS! THIS'LL BREAK UP THE SQUADRON — AFTER ALL WE'VE BEEN THROUGH! WE CAN'T AFFORD IT!
THE SQUADRON'S BREAKING UP ALREADY. YOU CAN'T HAVE MEN AROUND YOU — SABOTAGING THE OFFICERS' KITES, SIR...

THE SQUADRON COMMANDER WAS FORCED TO AGREE WITH THE YOUNG PILOT AND NEXT DAY, HARDWICK WAS BROUGHT UP BEFORE HIM.
CORPORAL HARDWICK, THIS IS AN EXTREMELY SERIOUS CHARGE. I ONLY HOPE FOR YOUR SAKE, IT'S ALL BEEN A MISTAKE — BUT MISTER CROSS' BRAKE-CABLE HAD DEFINITELY BEEN CUT...
I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT IT, SIR.

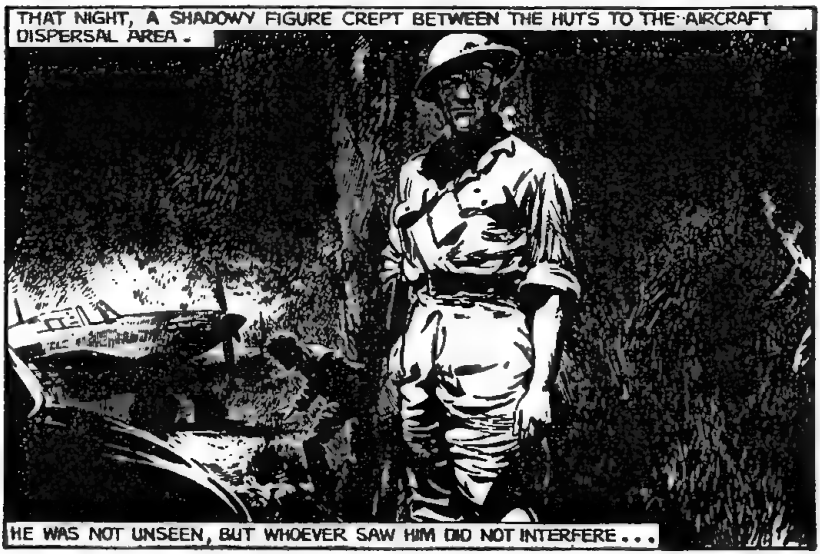
FLIGHT LIEUTENANT MURDOCH CORROBORATED DAVID'S EVIDENCE ABOUT THE REMARK OF HARDWICK'S THEY HAD OVERHEARD...
FRANKLY, SIR, I DON'T THINK HARDWICK MEANT ANYTHING — ONLY THAT HE HAD HIS REGULAR JOB OF MAINTENANCE TO DO...
MM! THANK YOU, DOC!


BRUCE TYRRELL'S THOUGHTS WERE GRIM...
THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE IS OVERWHELMING. WITH A CHARGE OF THIS MAGNITUDE, I'VE *GOT* TO HOLD HARDWICK OVER FOR COURT-MARTIAL. HE'S A DARNED GOOD FITTER, TOO... AND WE NEED EVERY ONE!

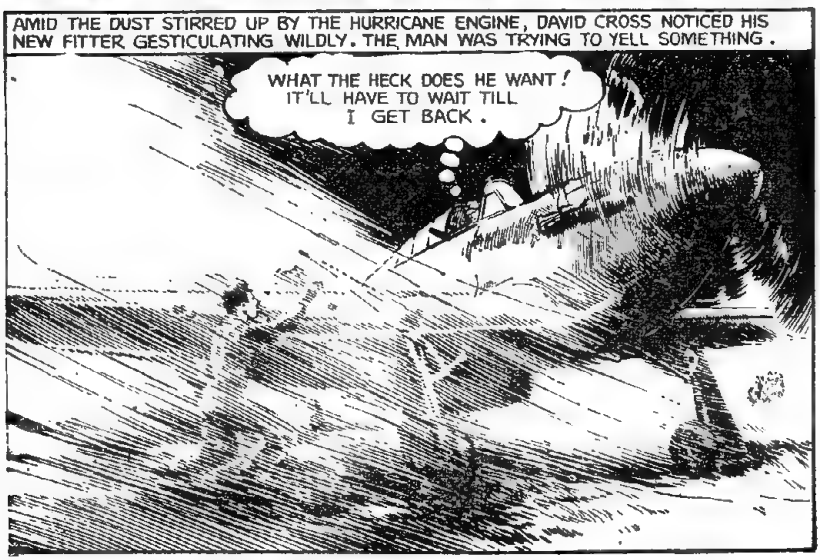

SO IT WAS THAT CORPORAL HARDWICK WAS PUT UNDER OPEN ARREST, PENDING A COURT-MARTIAL.
LOOK, DOC. I'VE NOW GOT TO CONVENE A SUMMARY COURT-MARTIAL... WOULD YOU BE GOOD ENOUGH TO BE ONE OF THE OFFICERS?
IF YOU WANT THEM TO BE IMPARTIAL, BRUCE, YOU'D BETTER GET THEM FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE... ARMY OFFICERS WOULD DO!

BRUCE HAD BORNE THE TERRIBLE STRAIN OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR TOO LONG...
WHAT A HECK OF A MESS, DOC! THIS SHOULD *NEVER* HAVE HAPPENED... WHERE ON EARTH HAVE I GONE WRONG!
POOR OLD BRUCE! IT WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED NORMALLY— BUT NOTHING IS NORMAL AROUND HERE!

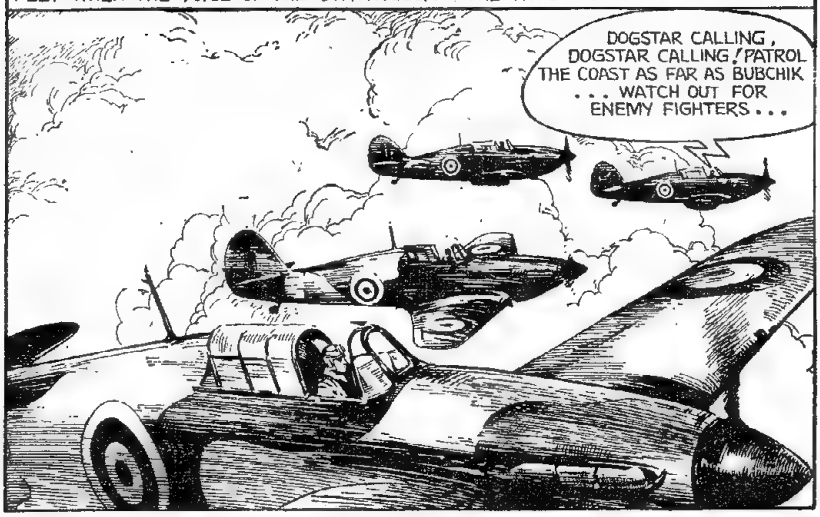
AS FOR DAVID CROSS, HE WAS MORE ALONE THAN EVER. HARDWICK HAD BEEN WITH THE SQUADRON A LONG TIME – AND THERE WAS HARDLY A MAN WHO NOW WISHED DAVID WELL.
AS IF WE HAVEN'T GOT ENOUGH TROUBLE WITHOUT CROSS CAUSING MORE!
I SUPPOSE THE SKIPPER WILL WANT ONE OF US TO DEFEND CHARLIE AT THE TRIAL. LOOK- WE'LL WORK OUT A CASE THAT'LL MAKE RINGS ROUND CROSS!


THAT NIGHT, A SHADOWY FIGURE CREPT BETWEEN THE HUTS TO THE AIRCRAFT DISPERSAL AREA.
HE WAS NOT UNSEEN, BUT WHOEVER SAW HIM DID NOT INTERFERE...

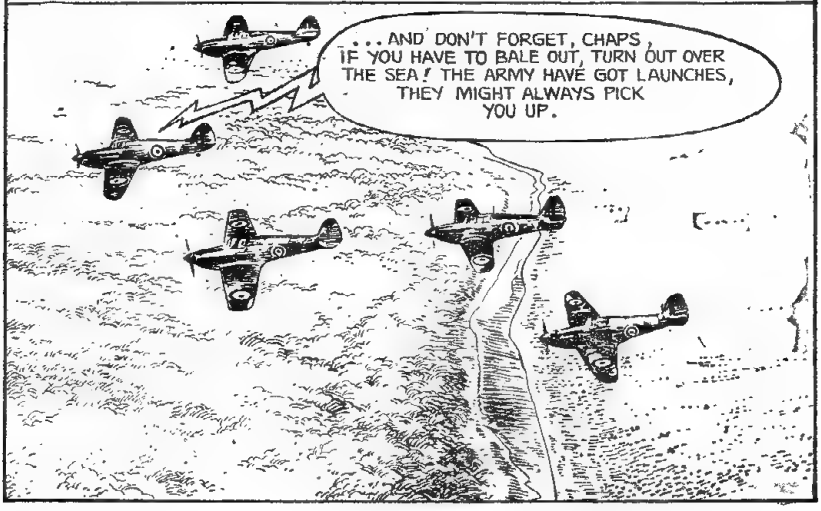
NEXT MORNING...
SCRAMBLE! SCRAMBLE!

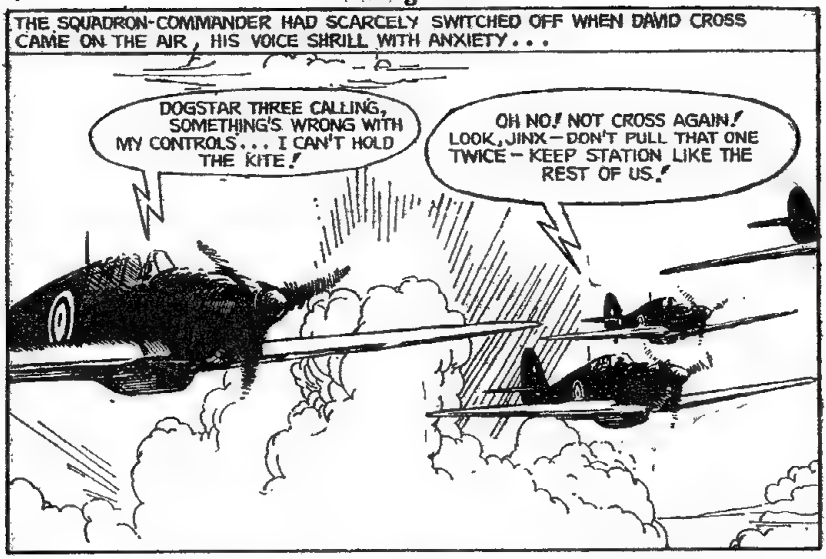

AMID THE DUST STIRRED UP BY THE HURRICANE ENGINE, DAVID CROSS NOTICED HIS NEW FITTER GESTICULATING WILDLY. THE MAN WAS TRYING TO YELL SOMETHING.
WHAT THE HECK DOES HE WANT! IT'LL HAVE TO WAIT TILL I GET BACK.

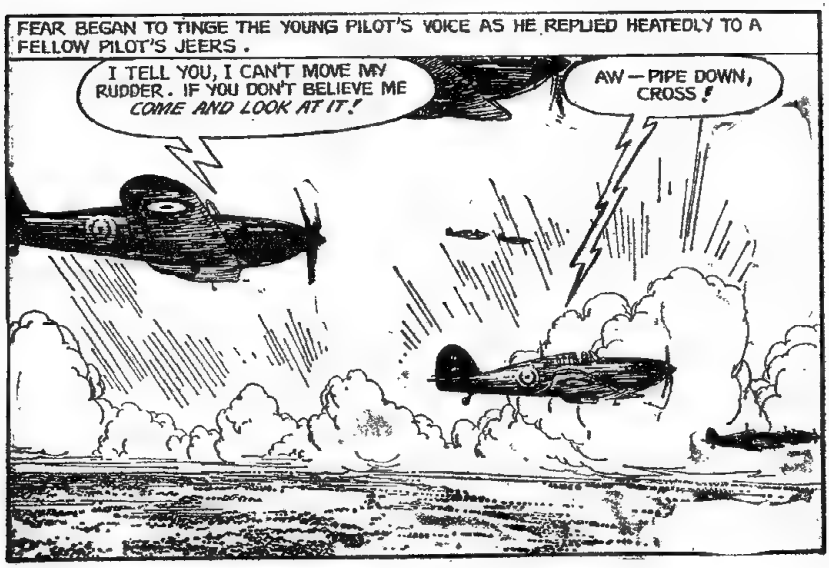
THE HURRICANES WERE SOON AIRBORNE. THEY WERE FORMING UP AT SEVEN THOUSAND FEET WHEN THE VOICE OF THE CONTROLLER CAME THROUGH . . .

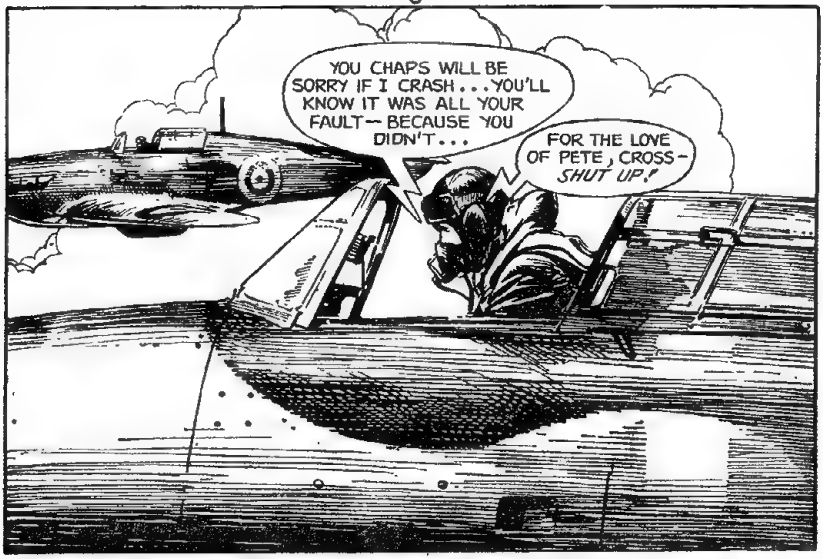


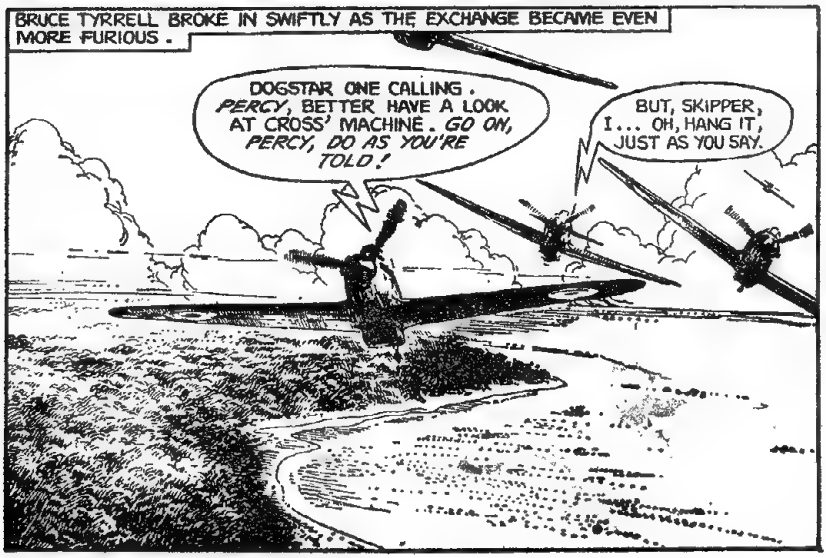
WHEN THE CONTROLLER SWITCHED OFF, BRUCE GAVE HIS OWN INSTRUCTIONS TO THE OTHERS, CONCLUDING WITH A LAST PIECE OF ADVICE.

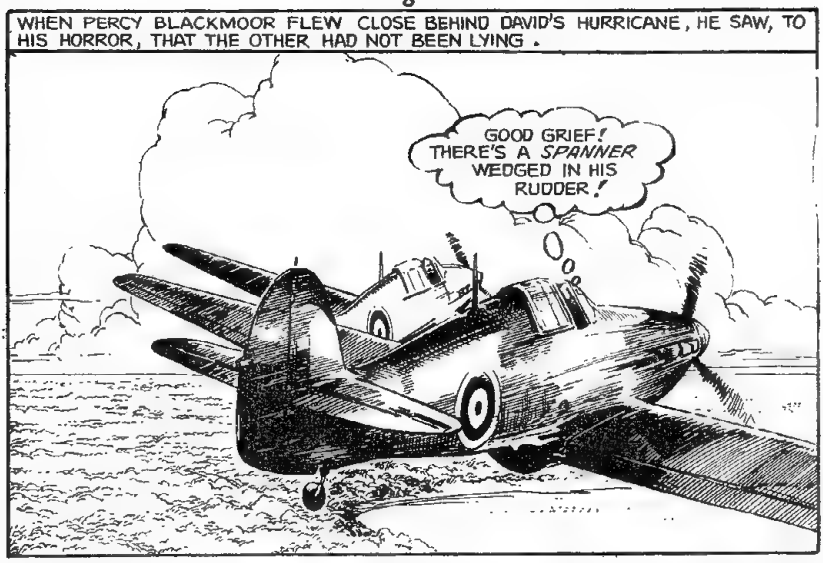


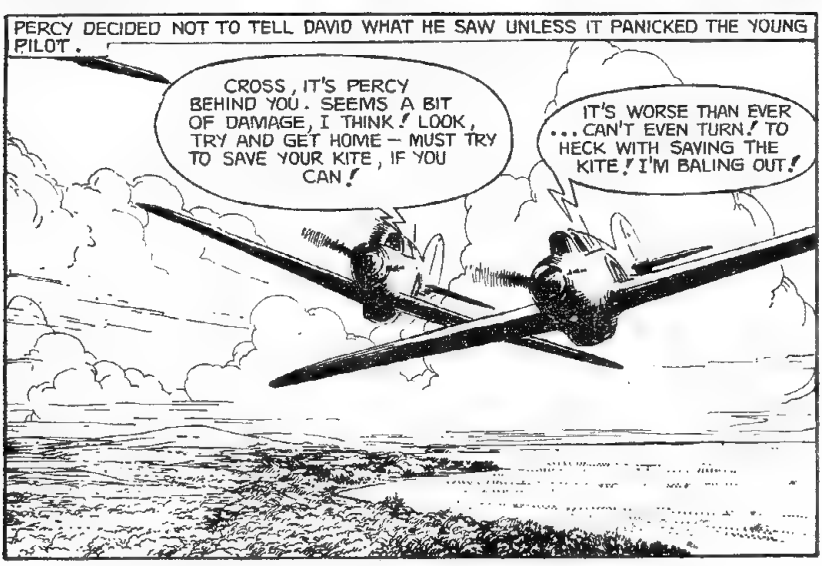

THE SQUADRON-COMMANDER HAD SCARCELY SWITCHED OFF WHEN DAVID CROSS CAME ON THE AIR, HIS VOICE SHRILL WITH ANXIETY...
DOGSTAR THREE CALLING, SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH MY CONTROLS... I CAN'T HOLD THE KITE!
OH NO! NOT CROSS AGAIN! LOOK, JINX—DON'T PULL THAT ONE TWICE—KEEP STATION LIKE THE REST OF US!

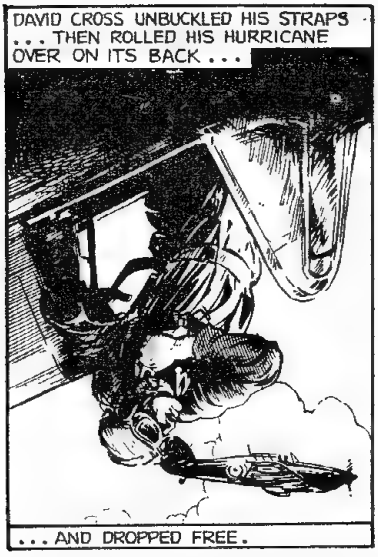

FEAR BEGAN TO TINGE THE YOUNG PILOT'S VOICE AS HE REPLIED HEATEDLY TO A FELLOW PILOT'S JEERS.
I TELL YOU, I CAN'T MOVE MY RUDDER. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME COME AND LOOK AT IT!
AW—PIPE DOWN, CROSS!


YOU CHAPS WILL BE SORRY IF I CRASH... YOU'LL KNOW IT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT— BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T...
FOR THE LOVE OF PETE, CROSS— SHUT UP!

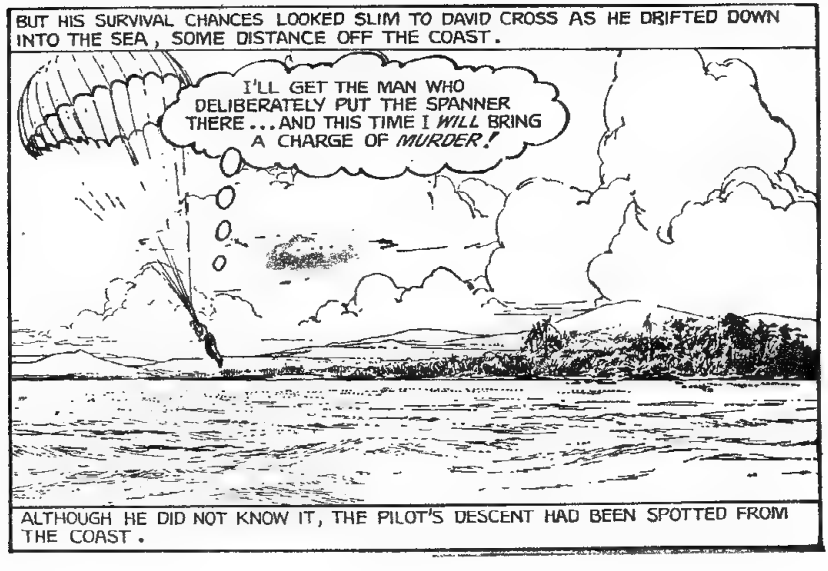

BRUCE TYRRELL BROKE IN SWIFTLY AS THE EXCHANGE BECAME EVEN MORE FURIOUS.
DOGSTAR ONE CALLING. PERCY, BETTER HAVE A LOOK AT CROSS' MACHINE. GO ON, PERCY, DO AS YOU'RE TOLD!
BUT, SKIPPER, I... OH, HANG IT, JUST AS YOU SAY.


WHEN PERCY BLACKMOOR FLEW CLOSE BEHIND DAVID'S HURRICANE, HE SAW, TO HIS HORROR, THAT THE OTHER HAD NOT BEEN LYING.
GOOD GRIEF! THERE'S A SPANNER WEDGED IN HIS RUDDER!

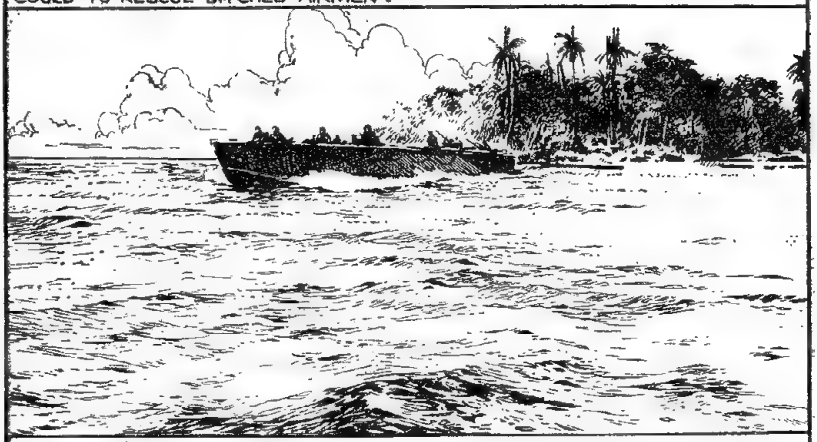

PERCY DECIDED NOT TO TELL DAVID WHAT HE SAW UNLESS IT PANICKED THE YOUNG PILOT.
CROSS, IT'S PERCY BEHIND YOU. SEEMS A BIT OF DAMAGE, I THINK! LOOK, TRY AND GET HOME — MUST TRY TO SAVE YOUR KITE, IF YOU CAN!
IT'S WORSE THAN EVER ... CAN'T EVEN TURN! TO HECK WITH SAVING THE KITE! I'M BALING OUT!


DAVID CROSS UNBUCKLED HIS STRAPS ... THEN ROLLED HIS HURRICANE OVER ON ITS BACK ...
... AND DROPPED FREE.

AS HE FELL AWAY, HIS PARACHUTE STREAMING BEHIND HIM, CROSS HAD A FLEETING VIEW OF HIS PLANE'S RUDDER ...
MY STARS! A SPANNER! PERCY MUST HAVE SEEN IT, TOO! IF I SURVIVE – I'LL GET THE MAN WHO TRIED TO KILL ME.

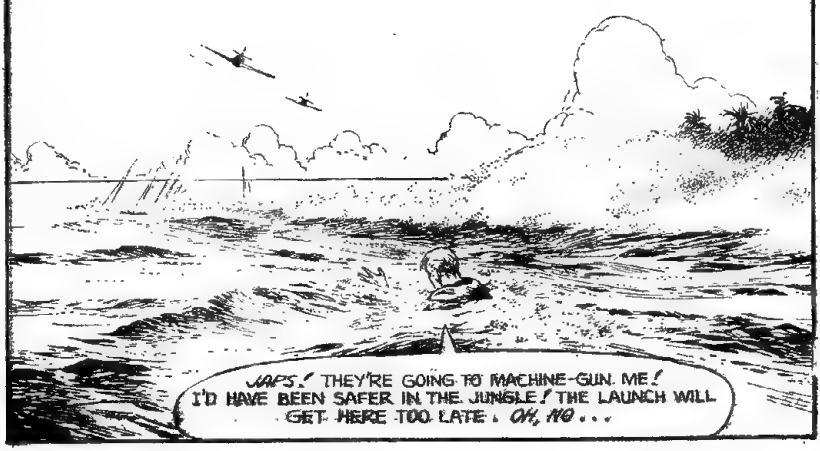

BUT HIS SURVIVAL CHANCES LOOKED SLIM TO DAVID CROSS AS HE DRIFTED DOWN INTO THE SEA, SOME DISTANCE OFF THE COAST.
I'LL GET THE MAN WHO DELIBERATELY PUT THE SPANNER THERE ... AND THIS TIME I WILL BRING A CHARGE OF MURDER!
ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT KNOW IT, THE PILOT'S DESCENT HAD BEEN SPOTTED FROM THE COAST.

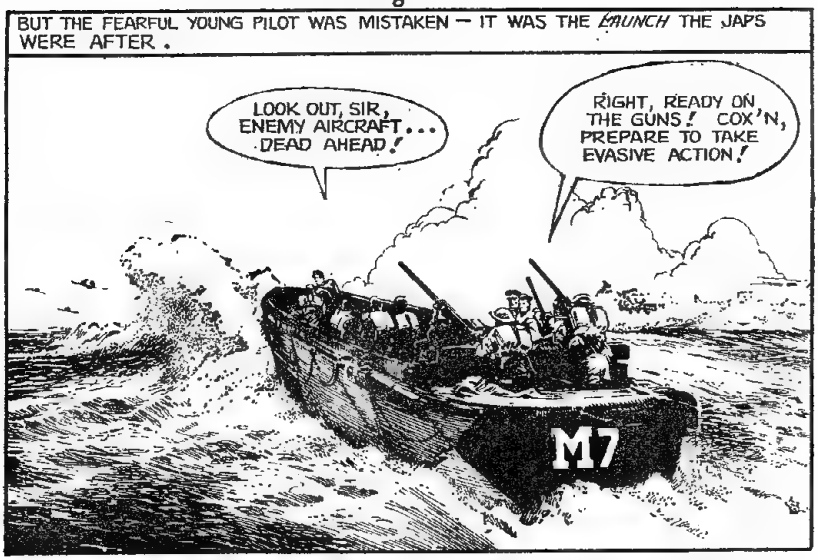
NO AIR-SEA RESCUE ORGANISATION EXISTED IN THAT AREA, BUT SOME OLD LAUNCHES WERE OPERATED BY UNITS OF THE ARMY. THEY DID WHAT THEY COULD TO RESCUE DITCHED AIRMEN.

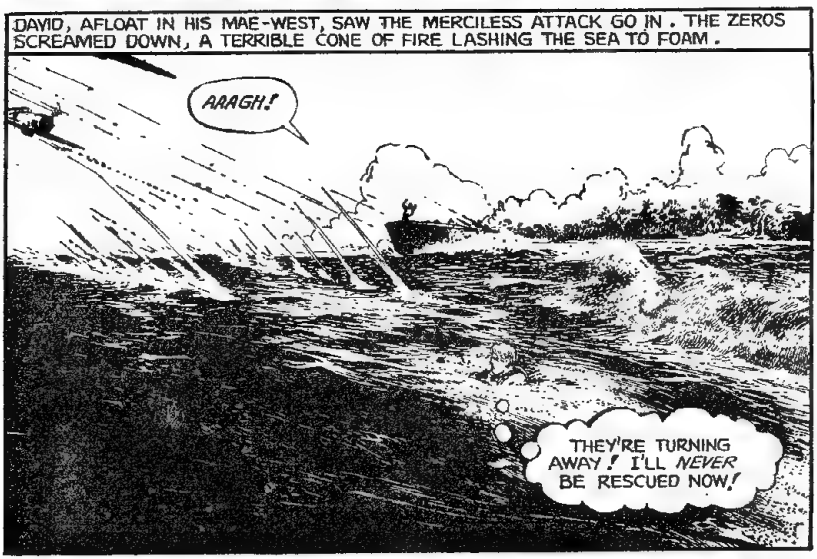


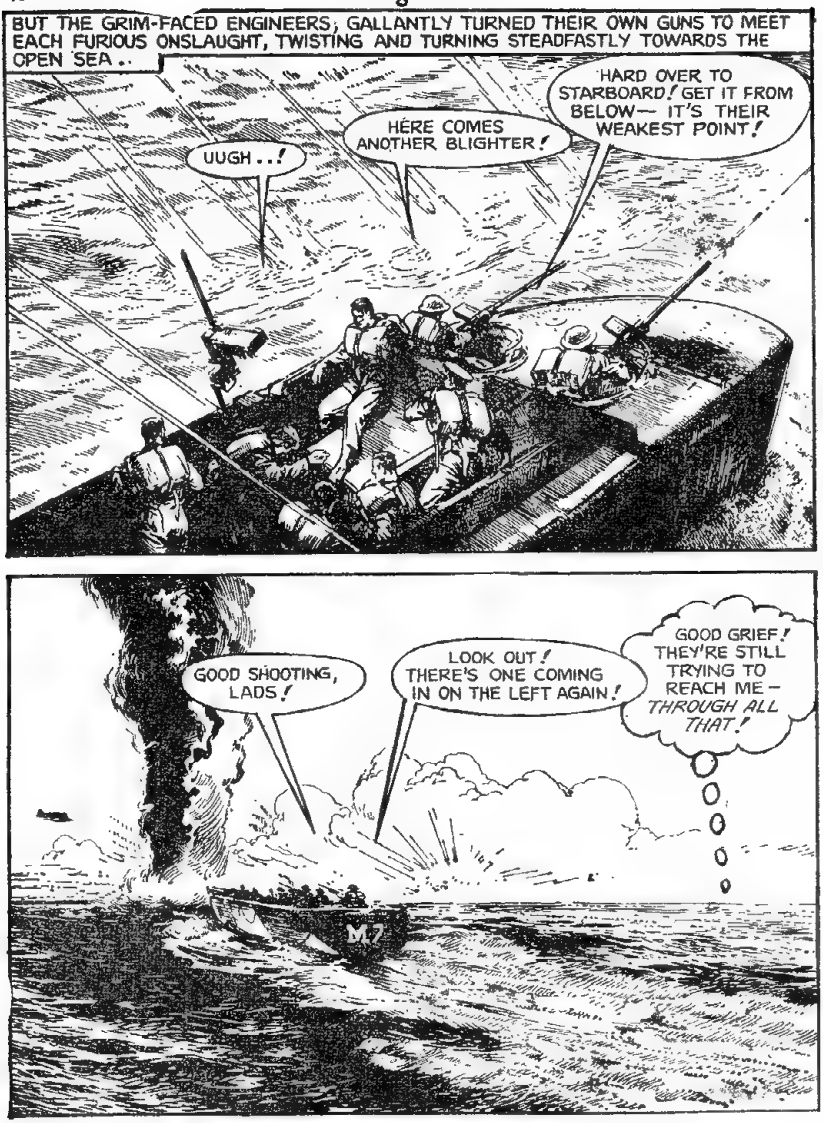
IN A VERY SHORT TIME, A ROYAL ENGINEER CAPTAIN WAS DIRECTING HIS CREW TOWARDS THE SPOT WHERE THE PARACHUTE HAD BEEN SIGHTED.

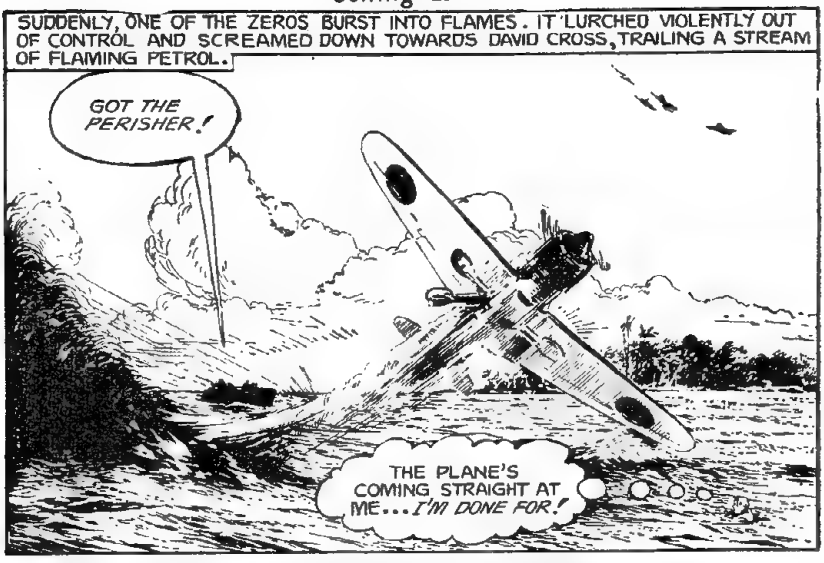
THE LAUNCH STILL HAD QUITE A DISTANCE TO GO WHEN DAVID CROSS SAW THREE FAST-APPROACHING SPECKS DIVING DOWN TOWARDS HIM. PANIC-STRICKEN, HE IDENTIFIED THEM...




BUT THE FEARFUL YOUNG PILOT WAS MISTAKEN — IT WAS THE *LAUNCH* THE JAPS WERE AFTER.
LOOK OUT, SIR, ENEMY AIRCRAFT... DEAD AHEAD!
RIGHT, READY ON THE GUNS! COX'N, PREPARE TO TAKE EVASIVE ACTION!
M7


DAVID, AFLOAT IN HIS MAE-WEST, SAW THE MERCILESS ATTACK GO IN. THE ZEROS SCREAMED DOWN, A TERRIBLE CONE OF FIRE LASHING THE SEA TO FOAM.
AAAGH!
THEY'RE TURNING AWAY! I'LL *NEVER* BE RESCUED NOW!

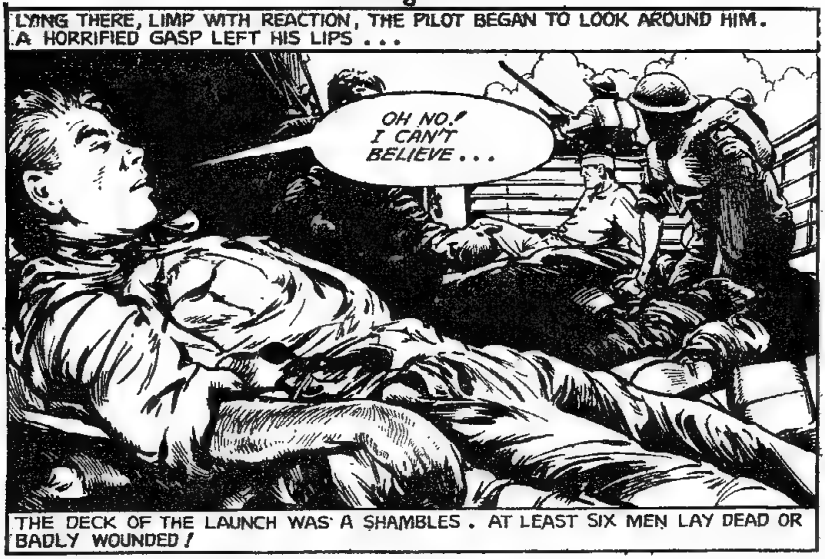

BUT THE GRIM-FACED ENGINEERS, GALLANTLY TURNED THEIR OWN GUNS TO MEET EACH FURIOUS ONSLAUGHT, TWISTING AND TURNING STEADFASTLY TOWARDS THE OPEN SEA..
UUGH..!
HERE COMES ANOTHER BLIGHTER!
HARD OVER TO STARBOARD! GET IT FROM BELOW— IT'S THEIR WEAKEST POINT!
GOOD SHOOTING, LADS!
LOOK OUT! THERE'S ONE COMING IN ON THE LEFT AGAIN!
GOOD GRIEF! THEY'RE STILL TRYING TO REACH ME— THROUGH ALL THAT!
M.7


SUDDENLY, ONE OF THE ZEROS BURST INTO FLAMES. IT LURCHED VIOLENTLY OUT OF CONTROL AND SCREAMED DOWN TOWARDS DAVID CROSS, TRAILING A STREAM OF FLAMING PETROL.
GOT THE PERISHER!
THE PLANE'S COMING STRAIGHT AT ME... I'M DONE FOR!

A SEARING BLAST OF HEAT LASHED ACROSS HIS UNPROTECTED HEAD . . .
AAAAGH!

HE MUST HAVE PASSED OUT FOR THE NEXT THING HE KNEW, THE LAUNCH WAS RIDING IN THE WATER, THROBBING BUT MOTIONLESS, BESIDE HIM.
WELL, SIR, WE DID IT! GOT TWO OF THE PLANES — AND THE OTHER BROKE OFF!
DARNED GOOD WORK, CHAPS! HERE, LET'S HAVE HIM INBOARD.

DAVID WAS DRAGGED ABOARD, GASPING, MUMBLING WHAT THANKS HE COULD IN HIS EXHAUSTED RELIEF. THERE WAS A GRIM JOVIALITY AMONG THE SOLDIER CREW.
THANKS... THAT WAS CLOSE ...THANKS A LOT!
IT'S ALL RIGHT, SIR — ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK... HAVE WE GOT ANY RUM LEFT, CAPTAIN BAKER? LOOKS LIKE HE COULD DO WITH IT!


LYING THERE, LIMP WITH REACTION, THE PILOT BEGAN TO LOOK AROUND HIM. A HORRIFIED GASP LEFT HIS LIPS . . .
OH NO! I CAN'T BELIEVE . . .
THE DECK OF THE LAUNCH WAS A SHAMBLES . AT LEAST SIX MEN LAY DEAD OR BADLY WOUNDED!

ALL THIS . . . JUST FOR ME!
THAT'S ALL RIGHT, SIR, IT'S ALL PART OF THE GAME!
PILOTS ARE TOP PRIORITY, YOU SEE! IT'S OUR JOB TO BRING YOU BACK ALIVE — TO FIGHT AGAIN!

AS THE LAUNCH SPED STEADILY OVER THE WATER BACK TOWARDS THE COAST, DAVID FELT A STRANGE NUMBNESS IN HIS HEART.

SIX OF THESE MEN GAVE THEIR LIVES TRYING TO SAVE ME!

THEY CAME ALONGSIDE A JETTY. DAVID WAS WELCOMED ASHORE LIKE A LOST HERO.

GOOD WORK! YOU'VE GOT HIM!

IT'S YOU R.A.F. CHAPS WE OWE SO MUCH TO! WE'RE GLAD TO DO SOMETHING IN RETURN.

DAVID CROSS WAS TOO OVERCOME TO SPEAK. HE HAD BEEN LIVING IN CONSTANT FEAR FOR DAYS... THEN HAD COME THE PARACHUTE FALL AND THE ATTACK BY ZEROS...

THEY TRIED TO PERSUADE DAVID TO REMAIN WITH THE R.E. COMPANY.

BUT DAVID HAD BEEN TAKING A NEW LOOK AT HIMSELF. HE SAW, AT LAST, WHAT HE WAS AND WHAT A DIFFERENT MAN HE COULD HAVE BEEN.

Chapter 4. FALSE CONFESSION

IT WAS TWO DAYS AFTER DAVID HAD PARACHUTED INTO THE SEA WHEN THE SQUADRON RECEIVED THE SIGNAL TO STAND BY FOR RECALL.

THINGS SEEMED TO HAVE GONE BETTER THE LAST FEW DAYS, MAINLY, PERHAPS BECAUSE THERE HAD BEEN NO MORE CASUALTIES...

AS FOR THE PROPOSED COURT-MARTIAL ON CORPORAL CHARLIE HARDWICK . . .
WELL, NOW THAT CROSS HAS GONE... I'VE QUASHED THE HEARING FOR LACK OF EVIDENCE.
IT LETS US OUT NICELY, DOESN'T IT, SKIPPER?

INTO THE MIDST OF THIS GENERAL FEELING OF RELIEF — DAVID CROSS RETURNED.
LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE ONLY JUST GOT BACK IN TIME – THEY SEEM TO BE PACKING UP.
WE'RE PROBABLY ONLY MOVING OUR BASE, WILL YOU COME AND MEET THE C.O., SIR?

BUT THERE WAS NO GLAD WELCOME AWAITING DAVID CROSS . . .
FOR THE LOVE O' MIKE – IT'S CROSS BACK AGAIN!
JUST WHEN WE'RE PULLING OUT... SOMETHING'S BOUND TO GO WRONG NOW!

WHEN THEY HEARD HOW HE HAD BEEN SNATCHED FROM THE SEA, UNDER FIRE FROM THREE STRAFING ZEROS, ALL THE OLD POISON FLOODED BACK INTO THEIR ATTITUDE.
SO SIX OF THOSE POOR DEVILS SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES FOR YOU!
IT'S THE JINX ALL OVER! HE HAD TO TAKE HIS BAD LUCK TO THEM, AS WELL!

BUT NO LONGER DID DAVID ARGUE, OR DENY THEIR BITTER ACCUSATIONS. THE M.O. WAS THE FIRST TO NOTICE THE CHANGE IN THE YOUNG PILOT . . .

THE SQUADRON COMMANDER MADE HIS REGRETFUL DECISION – TO GET IT OVER BEFORE THEY LEFT FOR INDIA.

A COURT-MARTIAL WAS HASTILY CONVENED. THE SAPPER CAPTAIN, WHO HAD BROUGHT DAVID CROSS BACK, SAT AS ONE OF THE THREE OFFICERS.

THE CASE RESTS ON THIS FACT: ON THE DAY IN QUESTION, THE BRAKE-CABLE OF PILOT OFFICER CROSS' AIRCRAFT WAS DISCOVERED TO BE CUT. NOW IT WAS CORPORAL HARDWICK WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF THIS PARTICULAR AIRCRAFT...

THE PROCEEDINGS BEGAN...

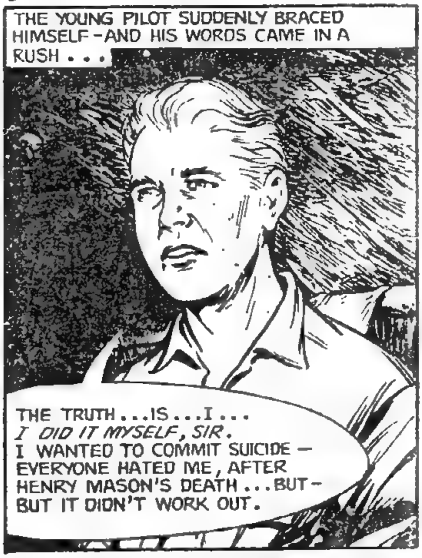
BUT WHEN IT CAME TO DAVID CROSS' TURN TO GIVE EVIDENCE, HE SEEMED TO HESITATE...

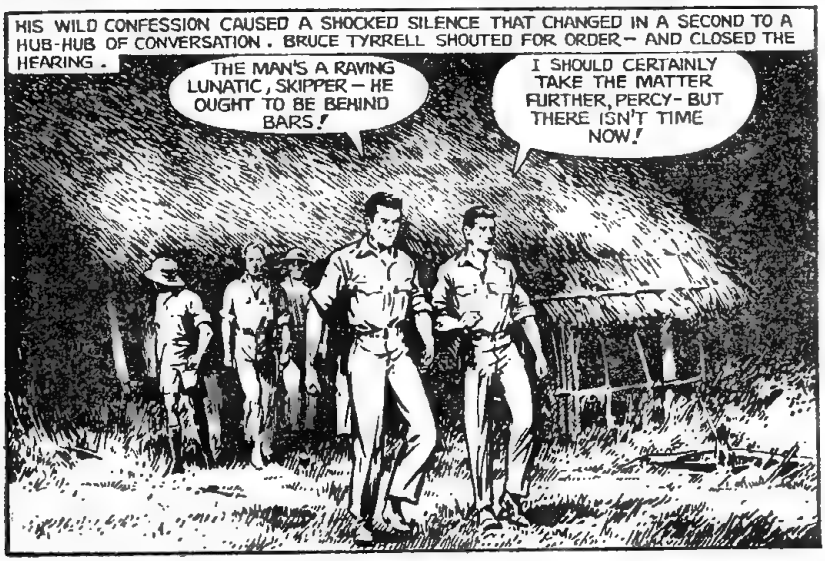
WELL..?

I...ER... I THINK *NOW* IT WAS ALL A MISTAKE, SIR!

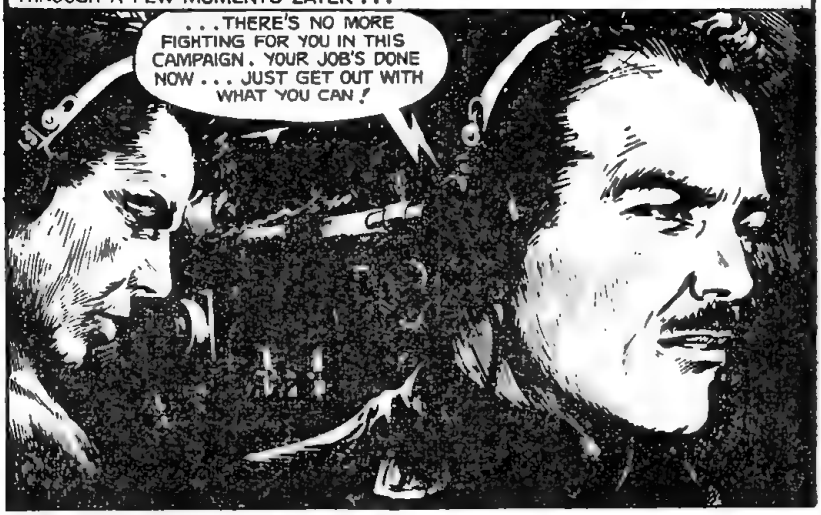
A MISTAKE! I SAW THE SHEARED CABLE MYSELF!

BRUCE TYRRELL FIXED HIS GAZE PENETRATINGLY ON DAVID CROSS...
NO, SIR— I DIDN'T MEAN—ER...
IF YOU'RE WANTING TO DROP THE CHARGE—IT'S TOO LATE. WE'VE GOT TO FIND OUT WHETHER THE ACCUSED WAS GUILTY OF CUTTING THAT CABLE OR NOT...


THE YOUNG PILOT SUDDENLY BRACED HIMSELF—AND HIS WORDS CAME IN A RUSH...
THE TRUTH...IS...I... *I DID IT MYSELF, SIR.* I WANTED TO COMMIT SUICIDE— EVERYONE HATED ME, AFTER HENRY MASON'S DEATH...BUT— BUT IT DIDN'T WORK OUT.


HIS WILD CONFESSION CAUSED A SHOCKED SILENCE THAT CHANGED IN A SECOND TO A HUB-HUB OF CONVERSATION. BRUCE TYRRELL SHOUTED FOR ORDER— AND CLOSED THE HEARING.
THE MAN'S A RAVING LUNATIC, SKIPPER— HE OUGHT TO BE BEHIND BARS!
I SHOULD CERTAINLY TAKE THE MATTER FURTHER, PERCY— BUT THERE ISN'T TIME NOW!

INDEED, THE LONG-EXPECTED WIRELESS MESSAGE OF WITHDRAWAL CAME THROUGH A FEW MOMENTS LATER . . .



BRUCE ORDERED THE FIVE REMAINING AIRWORTHY HURRICANES TO BE REFUELLED AND RE-ARMED FOR THE LAST TIME.

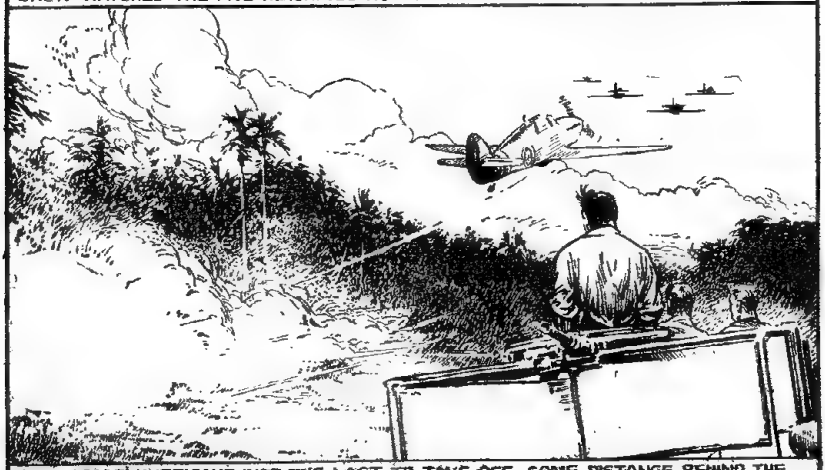
SOON, MOST OF THE GROUND STAFF OF THE SQUADRON WERE READY TO SET OFF NORTH INTO THE JUNGLE .

LEFT TILL LAST WERE THE FIVE FIT PILOTS INCLUDING DAVID CROSS, ENOUGH FITTERS AND MECHANICS TO START UP THE HURRICANES — AND, ON HIS OWN INSISTENCE, THE SQUADRON MEDICAL OFFICER .

DUST BLEW BACK FROM THE END OF THE AIRSTRIP AS THE HURRICANES BEGAN TO MOVE FORWARD

THE GROUND CREWS WERE IMPATIENT TO GET AWAY—AWAY FROM THE EERIE EMPTINESS ABOUT THE PLACE THAT HAD BEEN THE SQUADRON'S BASE THROUGH SO MANY ARDUOUS MONTHS.

FROM OVER THE TAIL-BOARD OF THE MOVING VEHICLE, THE M.O. AND THE GROUND CREW WATCHED THE FIVE MACHINES ROARING AWAY INTO THE STILL AIR . . .



DAVID CROSS' HURRICANE WAS THE LAST TO TAKE OFF, SOME DISTANCE BEHIND THE OTHERS.

AS DAVID CROSS BOOSTED HIS THROTTLE TO CATCH UP WITH THE OTHERS, HE SUDDENLY SAW THREE SPECKS REFLECTED IN HIS MIRROR. THEY WERE GROWING EVERY SECOND . . .

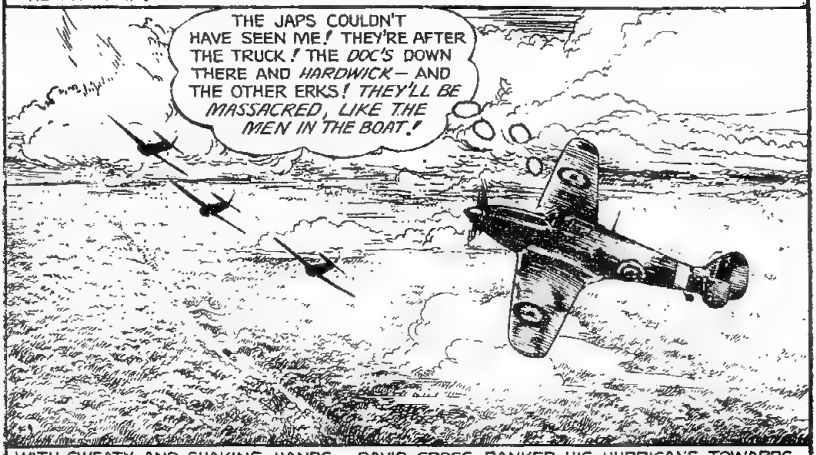
SKIPPER! SKIPPER! *THREE PLANES* — COMING UP FAST BEHIND US!

THE FAST APPROACHING PLANES SOON BECAME RECOGNISABLE. THEY WERE JAP ZEROS!

BUT NO ANSWERING VOICE CAME THROUGH ON DAVID'S EARPHONES AND HE CALLED AGAIN WITHOUT RESPONSE. THE OTHER HURRICANES FLEW STEADILY ON SOME DISTANCE IN FRONT OF HIM.

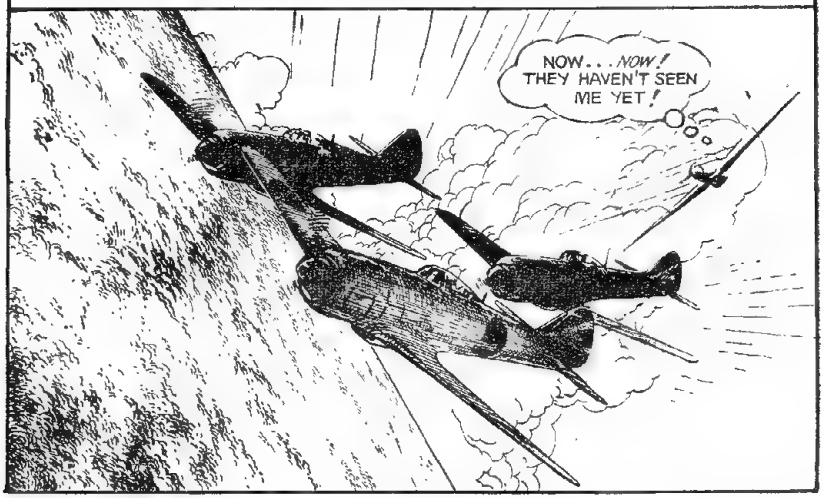
EITHER THEY'RE IGNORING ME — OR THEY CAN'T HEAR. THE RADIO MUST BE BROKEN DOWN. *THAT MEANS I'M ALONE AGAINST THREE!*

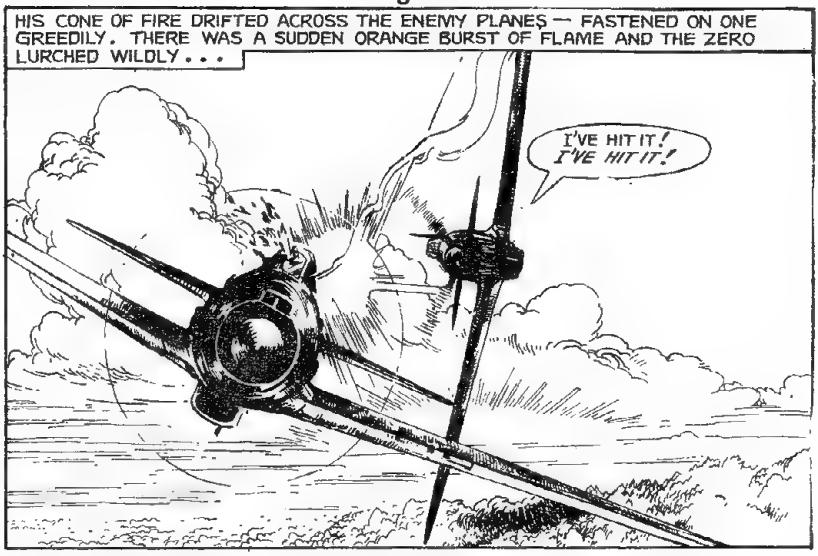
SUDDENLY THE PILOT REALISED THAT THE THREE ZEROS WERE NOT MAKING FOR *HIM*... THEY WERE DIVING DOWN ON THAT LAST TRUCK HURRYING AWAY FROM THE AIRSTRIP!

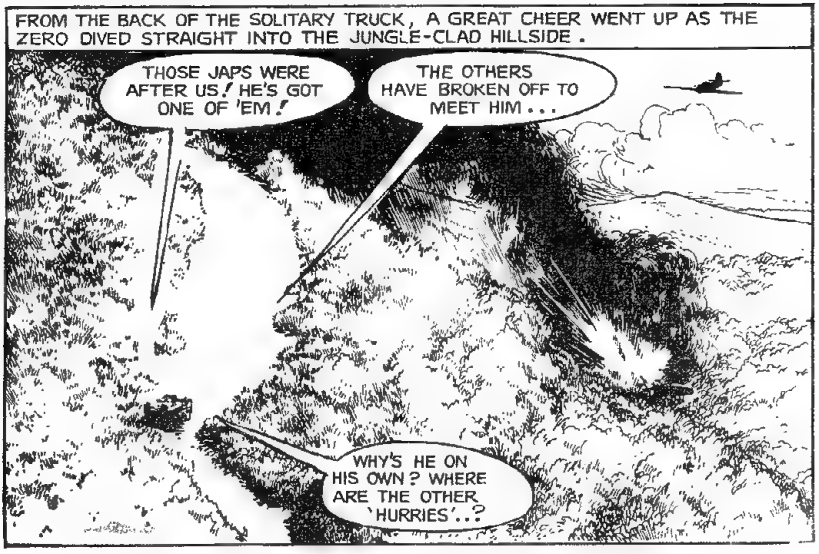


WITH SWEATY AND SHAKING HANDS, DAVID CROSS BANKED HIS HURRICANE TOWARDS THE ENEMY...

HIS ENGINE SCREAMING AT FULL BOOST, DAVID CROSS CAME IN ON THE ZEROS FROM BEHIND. HIS THUMB CLAMPED DOWN ON THE FIRING BUTTON...




HIS CONE OF FIRE DRIFTED ACROSS THE ENEMY PLANES — FASTENED ON ONE GREEDILY. THERE WAS A SUDDEN ORANGE BURST OF FLAME AND THE ZERO LURCHED WILDLY . . .
I'VE HIT IT! I'VE HIT IT!


FROM THE BACK OF THE SOLITARY TRUCK, A GREAT CHEER WENT UP AS THE ZERO DIVED STRAIGHT INTO THE JUNGLE-CLAD HILLSIDE .
THOSE JAPS WERE AFTER US! HE'S GOT ONE OF 'EM!
THE OTHERS HAVE BROKEN OFF TO MEET HIM . . .
WHY'S HE ON HIS OWN? WHERE ARE THE OTHER 'HURRIES'. . .?

VENGEFULLY, THE TWO REMAINING ZEROS TURNED ON THE LONE HURRICANE. TWISTING AND WEAVING, DAVID CROSS TRIED TO THROW THEM OFF, SCRAPING AT TREE-TOP HEIGHT ABOVE THE JUNGLE. DESPERATELY, HE CALLED ONCE MORE OVER THE R/T...

I'M ENGAGED BY TWO BANDITS... CAN YOU HELP ME? CAN YOU HELP ME?

BUT STILL THERE WAS NO RESPONSE.

SUDDENLY HE NOTICED HIS FUEL GAUGE...

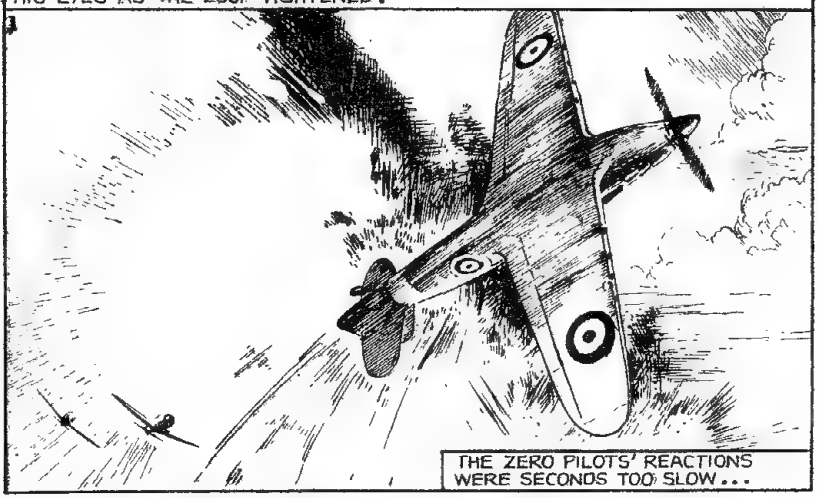
I-I'VE USED UP TOO MUCH JUICE — I'LL NEVER MAKE IT TO INDIA NOW!

HIS FRIGHTENED EYES FLASHED TO THE MIRROR ABOVE THE COCKPIT...

THEY'RE COMING IN AGAIN...

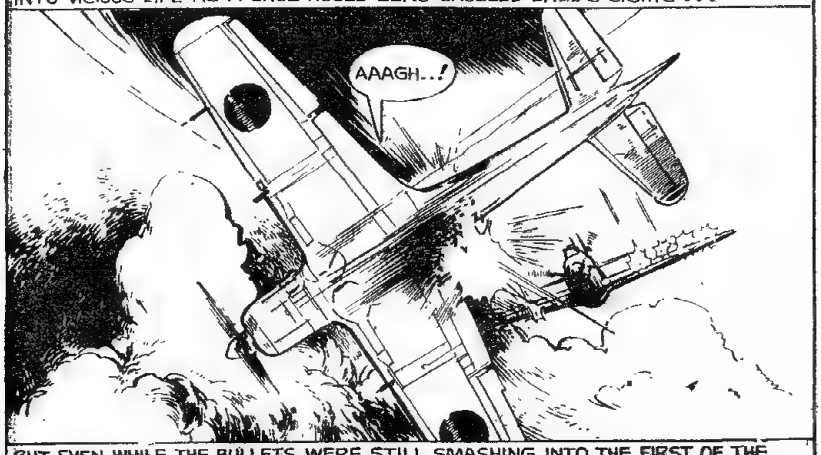
THE TWO ZEROS WERE ANGLING THEMSELVES BEHIND HIM, MANOEUVRING FOR THE LAST CONCERTED KILL.

THE TRAINED MIND OF THE FIGHTER PILOT INSTINCTIVELY TOOK OVER. DAVID HAULED BACK THE STICK WITH DESPERATE STRENGTH. HE FELT THE BLOOD DRAIN FROM HIS EYES AS THE LOOP TIGHTENED.

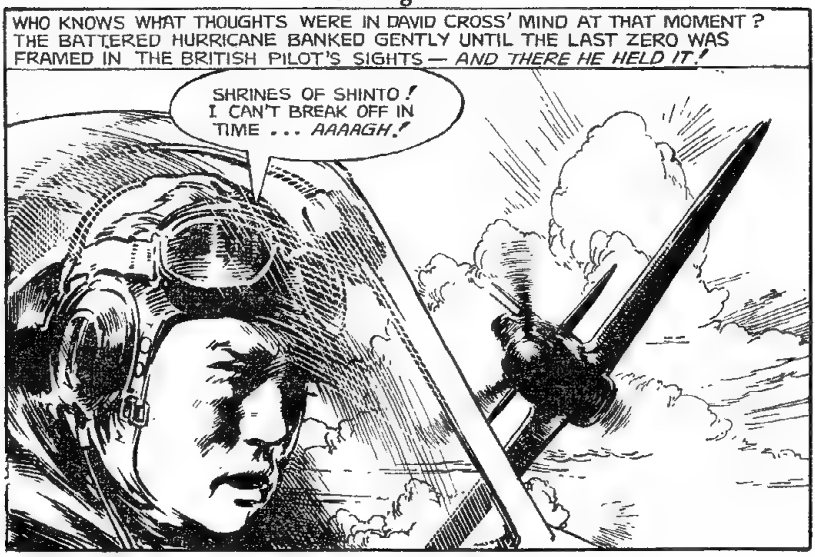


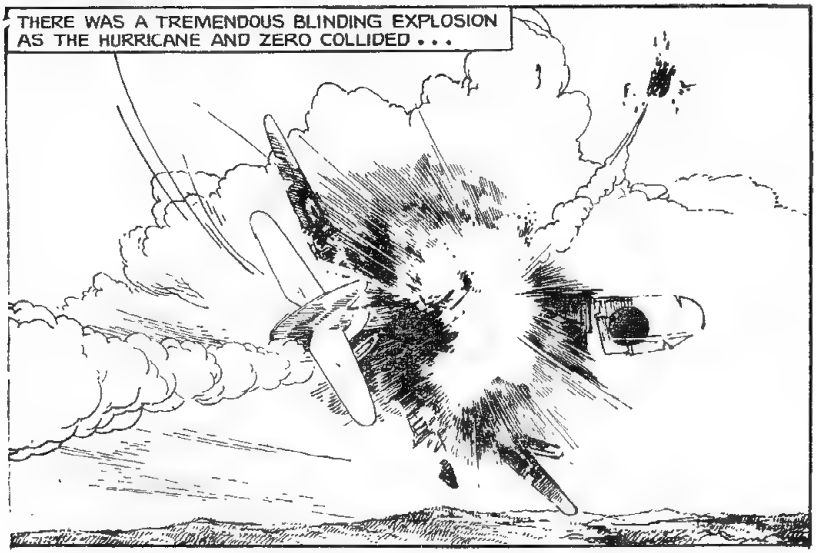
THE ZERO PILOTS' REACTIONS WERE SECONDS TOO SLOW...

THE HURRICANE FELL OUT OF ITS LOOP AND ITS EIGHT BROWNINGS FLICKERED INTO VICIOUS LIFE AS A SNUB-NOSED ZERO CROSSED DAVID'S SIGHTS...



BUT EVEN WHILE THE BULLETS WERE STILL SMASHING INTO THE FIRST OF THE TWO ZEROS, THE GUNS' VIBRATION STOPPED... AND DAVID CROSS KNEW HE HAD RUN OUT OF AMMUNITION.


WHO KNOWS WHAT THOUGHTS WERE IN DAVID CROSS' MIND AT THAT MOMENT? THE BATTERED HURRICANE BANKED GENTLY UNTIL THE LAST ZERO WAS FRAMED IN THE BRITISH PILOT'S SIGHTS — AND THERE HE HELD IT!
SHRINES OF SHINTO! I CAN'T BREAK OFF IN TIME ... AAAAGH!


THERE WAS A TREMENDOUS BLINDING EXPLOSION AS THE HURRICANE AND ZERO COLLIDED ...

WHAT TORTURED VISIONS FLASHED ACROSS THE LAST LIVING MOMENTS OF DAVID CROSS ? OF THE BATTLE-WEARY SQUADRON . . . THE BRAVE MEN IN THE LAUNCH WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR HIM . . . NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW.

INTERLOCKED, THE TWO PLANES SPUN TO THE GROUND AND SMOKE ROSE FROM THEM AS IF FROM A FUNERAL PYRE. DEATH HAD PASSED THAT WAY AND THE SKY WAS SILENT AGAIN—BUT DEATH HAD CLAIMED YET ONE MORE VICTIM.

Chapter 5. EPILOGUE

THE STORY-TELLER MOVED SO THAT A PATCH OF MOONLIGHT FELL UPON HIS LINED FACE . . .
EXAGGERATED — I DON'T THINK SO. YOU SEE, I'M FLIGHT LIEUTENANT MURDOCH — THAT MEDICAL OFFICER!
. . . AS TO WHO CUT THE BRAKE-CABLE — WHETHER BY ACCIDENT OR INTENTION — WILL NEVER BE KNOWN . . . AND IT'S BETTER SO! THEY'RE ALL DEAD NOW AND IT'S NO LONGER IMPORTANT. BUT ONE MAN MUST BEAR THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR DEATHS.
CROSS, YOU MEAN . . .

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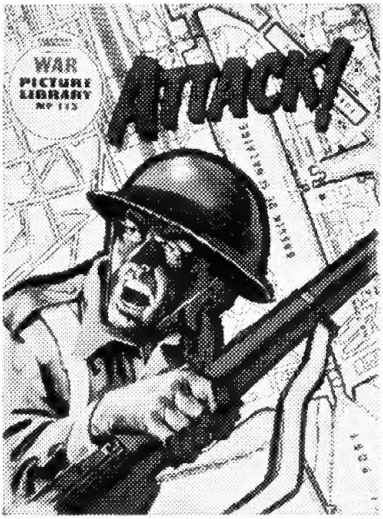

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